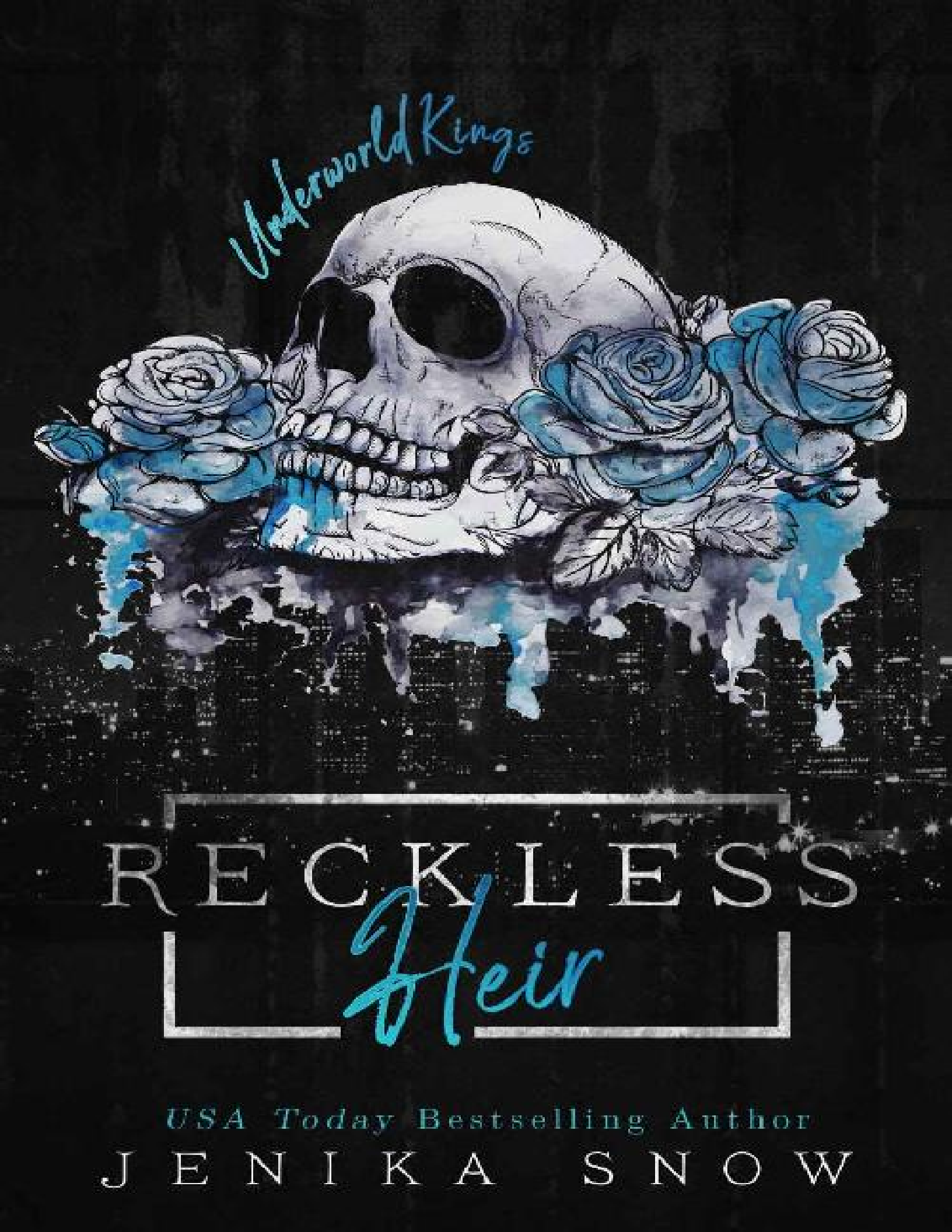
Underworld Kings
RECKLESS
Heir
USA Today Bestselling Author
JENIKA SNOW

Reckless Heir

UNDERWORLD KINGS

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RECKLESS HEIR (Underworld Kings)

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About the Author

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Author Note

For a full list of CW/TW for this title, please visit:

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My father sold me off to a ruthless killer in the Russian mafia, an alliance between the Bratva and the Cosa Nostra.

An arranged marriage where I'd be at the mercy of the man who'd no doubt see me as his property, where I was sure he'd be just as cruel and violent as every other Made Man I'd known in my life.

Nikolai Petrov, known to be a sociopath and for killing anyone for the smallest infraction. And I'd be forever tied to him, an accessory he could use or dispose of any way he saw fit.

And then I found myself painted red, my wedding dress stained in blood. A man dead by my husband's hands for simply touching my hair.

I was terrified of the lengths Nikolai would go to get what he wanted… to keep me as his, but despite all of that I felt something far stronger, far more dangerous.

Need. Want. Dark and depraved desire. And it was all for the man who said I was his.

For better or worse.

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PROLOGUE

Nikolai

We'd arrived at Butcher and Son, a decades-old abandoned slaughterhouse in the outskirts of Desolation, New York ten minutes ago. I looked down at my watch, expecting Arlo Malkovich any minute.

Arlo, a free agent in the crime syndicate known as the Ruin, did the dirty shit other men couldn't or wouldn't. Body clean-up, mercenary work, torture, and hits ordered down from the higher-ups from all factions of the underworld.

The Cartel, Bratva, Cosa Nostra, and any other illegal entity that needed a hub to get their guns, drugs, trafficking, or kills done easily and without legal interference.

And that's exactly what we were going to use Arlo for.

Our dirty work.

Not that I personally gave a fuck if anyone knew we were about to put a hit out on Leonid Petrov, our father and the Pakhan of the Desolation branch of the Bratva. The asshole had this long coming, and had dodged more attempted hits on his life over the decades than I could count.

The sound of a car pulling in, gravel being kicked up, and then followed by an engine being cut, a door being opened and closed sounded. I straightened and glanced at the partially opened metal doors just as footsteps echoed off the walls and Arlo stepped inside.

I glanced at my brother as he leaned against the rusted walls of the warehouse, Dmitry's body relaxed although I saw the lines around his tightened lips. He brought a cigarette to his lips and lit it, the end flaring a second before he inhaled, held it in, and then exhaled, tendrils of smoke curling around him. He brought it to his mouth again and inhaled, and I could see the tension growing in him. The end of his cigarette lit up once more in the darkness, a flare of brilliant orange as he inhaled.

I kept to the shadows as Arlo came closer, his focus on my brother. I knew he couldn't see me shrouded in the corner and I grinned.

Arlo stopped a few feet from where Dmitry still leaned against the wall. "Your brother can crawl out of whatever dark hole he's occupying anytime now." His voice was low and I grinned wider and laughed, the sound echoing off the rusty, debilitated walls. *The fucker.*

Dmitry inhaled from his cigarette again, that smoke circling him, clouding his visage, his focus trained on Arlo. My brother didn't say shit, just flipped the ash from his cigarette, took one more hit, then flicked it away before pushing off the wall and coming to stand before Arlo.

I tensed, taking a step closer but staying in the shadows, my hand on the butt of my gun as I prepared to fight dirty.

Dmitry grinned, a frightening visage with his lips peeled off his teeth, all straight, white, and flashing in the darkness. Dmitry started talking about the bullshit that happened at one of my father's establishments, an encounter where Arlo had taken it upon himself to obliterate the hands of one of Leonid's soldiers simply for touching a female Arlo had taken some hardcore interest in.

"I swear he's got a constant fucking hard-on because of it," Dmitry said. "It's been a long time since I've seen him so excited about something."

I moved forward then, coming up to Arlo from behind, the shadows slipping away from me.

I knew Arlo was well aware of my presence, but the fucker didn't even tense as I approached and I felt my grin widen even more. "I don't know whether to be offended or to up my game over the fact that you didn't even flinch in my presence," I said.

"Probably safe to assume both."

Arlo's words irritated me and I sneered at him as I came to stand beside my brother.

“Your father needs to find a hobby if my life is so consuming to him.” Arlo addressed Dmitry in reference to what had been said about our father.

Dmitry gave Arlo a sharklike grin.

Long moments of silence stretched out before Arlo broke it up by saying, “you need to get the fuck on with it and quit wasting my time.”

I noticed Arlo’s fingers twitching, and knew the sociopath wanted to go for his gun.

I didn’t want to have to kill Arlo, not when we needed him.

“I’d like to offer you a job.” Dmitry was the one to break up the silence.

“I already have a job with the Ruin,” Arlo said right away. “And even if I didn’t, I wouldn’t take a job from someone who barely has hair on his balls.”

My pulse jack-knifed at the low blow comment Arlo directed toward my brother.

But my brother didn’t take the bait. He laughed, deep and low. “Man, Arlo, if you were anyone else, I would have already put a bullet between your eyes for your insults.”

Arlo curled his lip. “You could *try*.” We may have only been a decade or so younger than Arlo, and far from children as Arlo so crudely implied, but we’d seen some heinous shit… done terrible things that we were right up there in the sociopathic killer tier as Arlo.

“I’m going to give you a pass on the disrespect.” Dmitry held up a finger. “But just this once, Arlo.”

“Is that so?” Arlo took a step forward and I tensed even more, about to move closer. But Dmitry held his hand up, stopping me from coming closer.

“I think we’re getting off on the wrong foot here.” Dmitry tipped his head to the side as if trying to examine Arlo, trying to figure him out. “I think this is something you’ll like, Arlo, something that will satiate that evil, tar-stained, fucked-up soul of yours.”

I chuckled in response.

And then the air shifted, changed as it charged with something sickly and vicious. The atmosphere changed, wasn’t filled with the laughter of demented men with fake smiles and twisted minds. It was a sudden seriousness that was cloaking, a sturdy presence like a fourth body in the room.

“We want you to kill our father.” Dmitry said it so matter-of-factly that I was pleased to see Arlo was actually taken aback. “I know, before you say it

or even think about it, that you're wondering if this is a setup." He held his hands out, palms up. "This is my brother and me offering you an olive branch. We're giving you a chance to take out the threat that is directed at your woman, no strings attached, no repercussions with the Bratva. No retaliation."

Arlo eyed us both. He wouldn't see shit. We knew how to keep our cool, how to act like shit was dark and deadly. He chuckled, but it held no humor. "You little shits think you can take down Leonid on your own?" He lifted an eyebrow as he eyed them both. "I'll give you both credit; you have some balls of steel, conspiring to take down one of the strongest Pakhan in the Bratva."

I stepped forward and spoke. "He's become unorganized, his vengeance with the Cosa Nostra becoming volatile. He's making too many mistakes and fucking things up. He's going to end up bringing a lot of fire and death down on this organization and ruin a lot of connections we have in place."

"I'm not sure how this is my problem," Arlo said, his jaw tightening further.

Dmitry gave me a hard smile. "This is *your* problem, because my father has plans for your woman."

I instantly saw Arlo's entire body tighten. The woman Arlo had become obsessed with was clearly someone special. A weakness. And it's what we'd use against him to get him to do exactly what we wanted.

Kill our father.

"I don't need you or your brother interfering," Arlo gritted out.

I made a deep sound in my throat and leaned back against the wall, crossing my arms over my chest and glaring at the bastard. "He's like a dog with a fucking bone over having you join the ranks," I said in reference to Leonid. I cocked my head to the side. "I don't get his obsession with you, but he holds you in high regard and will use whatever means necessary to bring you in." It was no secret our father wanted Arlo as a full-time Bratva soldier, but the coldhearted asshole in front of us preferred to stay a free agent.

But if Leonid wanted something he wouldn't stop until he got it… by any means necessary.

"And he plans on trying to use her as collateral to force my hand." Arlo didn't phrase it like a question. He was smart enough to know how twisted our father's mind was.

Neither me nor Dmitry said anything for a long while, letting that reality sink in with Arlo.

“I don’t think you understand the obsession my father has with that woman of yours.” Dmitry finally spoke. “But because he knows you want her, because you couldn’t control yourself at *Sdat'sya* and destroyed Dima’s hands, he won’t stop until he makes you see his way of thinking.” A muscle under Dmitry’s jaw ticked, as if just speaking about how fucked up our father was almost sent him into a rage. “He wants to make her *his*, Arlo. That’s the fucking truth of the matter.” Dmitry took another step forward, and once more Arlo’s body became tense.

With readiness.

And in turn I felt my own darkness rise up like toxic tendrils. My muscles tightened, blood rushed through my veins, and I had an itch under my skin to destroy someone or something.

And when I saw Arlo’s hand move to his back to no doubt get better access to his gun, I rolled my head around on my neck, cracked my knuckles, and felt adrenaline coursing through me.

“Do you understand what I mean, Arlo? Do you understand what my father does to women?”

I kept my focus on Arlo and what he was doing with that fucking hand by his gun. My fingers tightened around mine in preparation.

I bared my teeth and when Arlo looked at me I gritted out, “He’s a savage toward the fairer sex. Fucking deplorable. He’ll destroy her, Arlo, and I don’t mean end her life in the most humane, painless way possible.” I pushed off the wall, not bothering to hide the gun in my hand, my finger on the trigger. “He’ll beat her down mentally and emotionally until she’s nothing more than dough that he can form into whatever vision he sees fit. And when he’s the only thing that she can grasp on to, when he has you right where he wants you, he’ll destroy you too.”

A deep growl of aggression and warning left Arlo.

I glanced at my brother and saw him smirk. We had Arlo right where we wanted him.

The feelings Arlo had for this woman clearly went deeper than sexual or obsession. Dare I say the sociopath in front of us actually *cared* for her?

“Our father needs to be taken out, Arlo. And because you now have a direct link to him through your woman, because she’s a threat and you

know my father won’t stop until he gets what he wants, which is now both of you, she won’t be safe.”

Arlo curled his lip at Dmitry. “Don’t fucking act like you’re giving me some kind of fucking gift, like you’re doing me a favor. You’re doing this because you want power, Dmitry. You’re doing this because your father is psychotic and destructive, becoming too volatile apparently. Don’t fucking act like you’re giving a handout simply because you have a good heart. It’s just as fucking black and soulless as mine.”

Dmitry laughed and looked over at me, which had me chuckling as well. “As much as we’d like to take out the old fucker ourselves, show him the kind of family love he’s shown us as we grew up, you know how our world works.” Dmitry looked back at Arlo. “It would be bad form for us to have a personal hand in it. But you’re the best of the best. A real coldhearted bastard, aren’t you? You could take him out and make it look like he just disappeared. *Poof*,” Dmitry said as he curled his hand into a fist in front of his face.

Arlo started pacing, the clear intellect on his expression telling me he was thinking about all possible outcomes and disadvantages and advantages to killing the Pakhan of the Desolation Bratva.

Arlo stopped and growled out, “She’s mine.”

Dmitry started laughing. “Yeah, I think you made that pretty fucking obvious when Dima touched your girl and you pulverized his fucking hands.”

I started laughing even harder this time after my brother spoke.

“Although it served the fucker right. He was a touchy bastard and doesn't know what the word ‘no’ means.”

And that’s when I saw everything settle within Arlo. He’d made up his mind.

“You and I both know you’re going to take him out.” There was clear confidence in Dmitry’s voice.

“My brother and I don’t need more war. We want an alliance between the Cosa Nostra and Bratva. We need to grow stronger and create not only domestic deals but international ones. And we found a way to do that. But if our father stays in power, he’ll destroy the progress we’re making.” Dmitry looked at me and smirked, a silent affirmation of all of this passing between us.

“Didn’t you know?” I prompted and stalked toward Arlo. “I’m getting hitched. Got an arranged marriage to a sexy little just-turned-eighteen Italian hottie.” Although I didn’t fucking know if she was sexy, it didn’t fucking matter, not when this was strictly a power move. But Arlo didn’t need to know all the details.

I wagged my eyebrows and grinned lasciviously.

Arlo stared at me in the eyes. “That’s your plan? An arranged marriage between the Petrov Bratva and Cosa Nostra?” He ran a hand over his face and shook his head. “You guys are even crazier than I thought.”

Dmitry grinned but didn’t say anything else.

“So we came to a father killer to handle this.” I knew that would drive the nail into the proverbial coffin for Arlo. He knew all about killing fathers seeing as he did his own in when he was only sixteen.

And as I watched Arlo’s eyes narrow, I grinned. Yeah, he’d do this for us.

He’d help us bury our psychopathic father.

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CHAPTER

ONE

Amara

"But I don't love him, papa," I whispered as I stared at my father, knowing my words fell on deaf ears but I said them anyway. And to be honest, I wasn't sure why I was so shocked that this was happening. "I don't know him."

In our world—the dark and gritty, ugly and brutal one that was ruled by the mafia—arranged marriages were common. The women didn't have to know the men they were to marry. They didn't have to love them or even like them.

They just had to obey because this was all done to strengthen ties between families.

But this wasn't a marriage to a fellow Italian mafia house, which had always been the norm.

This was me being given to Nikolai Petrov, second born son to Leonid Petrov, Pakhan to the Petrov Russian bratva.

Nikolai Petrov.

It was a name I'd heard my father speak before as I eavesdropped on his meetings, on the phone calls he made in his office in the weeks leading up to this conversation. He'd beat me with his belt if he'd known I'd been listening to his private meetings, but when I'd heard my name mentioned, tying my life to a man I didn't know, a man who was more than likely the exact same breed and cut from the same cloth as all the other monsters surrounding me, I'd taken notice and didn't care about repercussions if caught.

My father, Marco Bianchi, had his hard eyes set right on me, his jaw looking even more severely cut as he ground his teeth. Me questioning anything he did was an affront to him, an offense. Because I was nothing but a lowly daughter good for nothing but pawning off to secure my father's power even more.

His expression told me plenty even though he said nothing.

"He's crazy, papa," I said low, my tone desperate, not knowing anything about Nikolai, but I didn't have to know him to understand the type of male he was and where he came from. "He's a Russian." Those three words seemed like the most logical explanation for him being a lunatic.

I knew enough of our world that it wasn't as if the Cosa Nostra was friendly with the Bratva, certainly not close that they'd pawn daughters off to sons. Yet here we were. Here I was.

"You'll do what I say, girl, and thank me afterward," he clipped out in Italian. His tone said that was the end of it and there would be no other questions asked.

My father wasn't an affectionate man, in fact, he'd never told me he loved me, hadn't hugged me, shown me any kind of caring or nurturing touch in my eighteen years. I'd come to accept that although I was his flesh and blood, he saw me as nothing more than a commodity. Something he owned. Something he could use to up his status as underboss.

He was the king and I was a pawn in his game of chess.

My father flicked his hand toward the door, a silent, "get out".

I felt my shoulders sag forward, and hated myself for showing any kind of weakness in front of him.

I left and shut his office door behind me and leaned against it, feeling my mother's gaze on me. I lifted my head and stared at her. She stood down the hall wringing her hands together, a horrified look on her face.

Fernanda Bianchi was as much a prisoner and board game piece as I was. She, too, had been given to my father when she was barely eighteen, their marriage arranged, my mother forced to be with an older man who treated her like nothing but a vessel for his heirs.

We were all just tools, bargaining chips to them. *The weaker sex*, as they called us.

My fifteen-year-old sister, Claudia, had a spirit that I wish I'd possessed, a fire in her veins that I wanted for my own, and a freethinking mind that I envied. She didn't care about rules or traditions no matter how

many times Father scolded her, or Mother talked to her. She lived by her own rules, and as much as I loved her for it, I also worried for her and the world we lived in. If a woman couldn't be submissive to the men in our lives on their own… it was beaten into them.

Then there was my twenty-one-year-old brother Gio, who was just as ruthless and coldhearted as our father---as every man in the underworld kingdom--was a prisoner, too. He'd been warped and twisted up, indoctrinated into all things mafia that it's just who he was now. But even the life he led, the rules and expectations for his life hadn't made him evil. Not truly. Not yet.

"*Passerotta*." *Sparrow*.

It was the nickname my mother and brother had given me when I was a child because they said I fluttered around constantly, little wings taking me from one place to another.

My mother's voice was soft, submissive, and I heard a hint of sympathy laced in that lone word. Although I knew she probably didn't want this life for me, she didn't say otherwise. My father had shaped my mother into the woman who stood before me; softly spoken, eyes always diverted to the ground when he was in the room, her appearance always perfect.

I wondered how she could find any happiness.

I knew he hit her when he was mad, when she didn't do what he said, when he wasn't happy enough with… anything.

"Mamma," I choked out and covered my mouth with a hand, refusing to cry even though my eyes watered. I was an adult, an eighteen-year-old woman who was crying and rushing to her mother for comfort. And I felt no shame in that.

"Come, darling" she said softly and held her hand out to me.

I slipped my palm in hers and let her lead me down the hallway, around the corner, and followed her as we descended the stairs. She took me to the gardens, a place I knew was where she found her solitude, where she felt safe and free.

I felt the tears start to fall as we sat on the wrought iron bench and stared at the blooming roses. The gardens were meticulously landscaped, mainly by the workers coming in daily to tend to it as if it were a religion, but my mother could also be found here during her free time.

"Mamma," I whispered her name again and felt her hand cover mine, which rested on my lap. As I sat beside my mother I felt like a little girl

again. I felt as vulnerable as one. “He's the bratva.” My mother knew this, yet I said it again, as if it would make a difference, change my fate.

She didn’t speak, but her silence was comforting in itself.

“Does Gio know? Claudia?” They’d know eventually, sooner rather than later.

“Gio was told.” She shifted beside me. “He wasn’t pleased with your father’s decision, but there wasn’t anything to be done. The deal had already been made.”

The deal had already been made.

I looked at my very traditional Italian mother and waited until she glanced at me. I stared up into her crystalline blue eyes, ones the exact same shade as mine. It was the only thing all three of us had inherited from her. Where she was fair skin and blonde hair, me and my siblings took after my father’s darker Sicilian side with our olive skin tone and black hair.

“In life we have to make sacrifices.” She swallowed. “We have to do things we don’t want for things to stay positive.” She lifted her hand and cupped the side of my face.

I’d grown up knowing the Russian mafia was the enemy, a dangerous and brutal organization, one my father said was filled with savages.

She smoothed her thumb over my cheek and dropped her hand back to her lap, glancing at the gardens once more. I did the same.

“Amara,” she said my name softly and my throat tightened.

I knew that tone. It was the one she used when things were lost, when there was nothing to do but obey.

I closed my eyes and felt more tears move down my cheeks. I knew the man I was to marry would be cruel. He’d be like my father… he’d be like all the men in our world. And there was nothing I could do. Running wasn’t an option. I had security with me constantly, a precaution my father took because there were men, bad men like him, who would use me to get to him. I had no money, no real friends to turn to for help. I had nothing to my name aside from what was in the home behind me.

So here I was, knowing my life was in the hands of others, knowing I had no choice but to go along and hope for the best.

Because as soon as I said “*I do*” to Nikolai Petrov, I’d be nothing but a vessel for his sexual depravity, and the babies he’d make me have for him.

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CHAPTER

TWO

Nikolai

The lights were obnoxious, the music too loud. And the people grinding and bumping against each other reminded me of cattle. They stunk, were sweaty, and I found myself curling my upper lip in disgust.

I followed my older brother Dmitry through the dance floor, the bodies parting ahead of us, my fingers twitching because all I thought about was pulling out my gun and shooting the next drunken asshole who elbowed me.

We finally made it to the backroom, and once the door was shut behind me, I leaned against it, crossing my arms over my chest, my leather jacket stretching across my chest, my hand close to my gun tucked in the holster at my side.

Dmitry had been silent for the last twenty minutes since we found out we had a motherfucking traitor right under our noses. I could feel the tension and aggression seething from him because of it.

My brother walked over to the scarred wooden desk across from the door, a stack of papers on one side, the rest scattered across the top. The grey, old as fuck chair behind it was pressed to the wall, the large black stain and three holes on the backrest a lasting memory that had me smirking on how it got there.

Because of me. Because I'd shot the bastard who'd been sitting in it just last year. Fucker had been cooking our books and skimming off the top.

I made sure to put that problem to rest real damn fast. And I got a thrill of pleasure every time I stared at that dam near black stain from where I'd

put three bullets in his chest.

“Where is he?” Dmitry finally spoke, his voice deep, rough, and filled with a hell of a lot of emotions.

“They’re bringing him in, Pakhan.” Vladislav said, staying to the side, his hands clasped behind his back and taking on the stance of a good and loyal soldier.

And the prick they were bringing to us? Stupid asshole had also been stealing from us. But that wasn’t even the biggest issue. If that had been the only issue that had come up I would have made an example of him by cutting off his hands.

But nah, the bastard was also giving intel to our enemies, making back alley fucking deals to line his pockets and gain connections. Fucker actually thought we wouldn’t find out.

So now there wouldn’t just be sawed off hands, but also a hell of a lot of other painful things I’d do to remedy the situation.

That’s where we differed. Dmitry let his emotions control him. Although I wasn’t a fucking sociopath by the technical term, but I sure as hell knew how to keep my emotions in check and keep that mask in place.

Showing emotions was dangerous, and in our world that was nothing but a weakness.

Dmitry had his back to us, his hands shoved in the front pockets of his dark jeans. He stared at the wall, an out of date calendar tacked to it.

We all stood there in silence as we waited for the soon-to-be-dead piece of shit to make an appearance.

I stared at my brother, who remained like stone, his body tense, the dangerous fucking energy radiating from him.

I was glad he’d taken over as Pakhan for the Bratva in our city of Desolation. Because even despite his lack of keeping his emotions in check and staying cool under pressure, his fucking mind was like a work of art. All critical thinking and twisted plot reasoning.

The bastard was a damn mastermind.

“We expected this,” Dmitry said and turned to face me.

I didn’t respond, knowing he was talking about the traitor and what led up to this. Our father had been so consumed in his own greed and power struggle that he didn’t notice what was right in front of him. But we saw everything, so after he was taken out we saw a shift in ranks.

There were bastards who were trying to go against us in our own organization, and because they were trying to expedite shit, they were getting sloppy. When you didn't take your time that's when mistakes started to happen… that's when you got caught.

Like what was going to happen to the bastard who would die by our hands tonight.

"With father out of the picture there's bound to be those in the Bratva that push back with the change in leadership."

I grunted my agreement.

Although we hadn't confirmed that we'd been the ones to hire Arlo Milkovich to take out our father, we also hadn't denied it. There'd been no secret that there was no love lost for our father.

We'd been nothing to him but pawns to use, pieces to move on the chessboard of his twisted version of life.

And he sure as fuck used us.

I knew he'd been working on selling off our youngest sister, an arranged marriage to a high-ranking Russian who would have ruined her in the most depraved of ways. And then there was Dmitry and I, who had been beaten and torn apart, "toughened" up for the world we lived in by our father's own hands.

I couldn't count the number of men I killed at my father's orders, brutal and torturous ways to send a message. This was how it had been since we were old enough to walk and talk, shaped and molded into the warped men that stood in this room today.

And although taking him out would've been necessary given the fact he was moving the organization in a direction that would have collapsed alliances and already laid plans for growth, I wasn't going to deny, and I knew Dmitry wouldn't either, that killing our father had also been a personal satisfaction as well.

The bastard had needed to be killed.

I relaxed my arms and looked down at my hands, picturing all the heinous shit I'd done with them over the years… all the fucked up acts I'd have to do with them tonight. By the time I left the club the sun would be rising and my palms and fingers would be stained red from taking a life slowly, painfully.

Therapeutically for my fucked up soul.

“We need to expedite your situation.” Dmitry’s hard voice pulled me out of my macabre thoughts and I looked at him. He ran a hand over his jaw, his expression lost in thought. “We need to push up the wedding.” My brother looked at me then but I made sure to keep my expression void.

“Move up?” We hadn’t even spoken about a firm date on when I’d wed the Bianchi girl, but it didn’t matter when it happened, just that it did.

Dmitry nodded. “Yeah. move it up to set things firmly in place.”

Before we hired Arlo to end our father, we set up safeguards in place for growing a Bratva. And that included an arranged marriage between myself and the daughter of Marco Bianchi of the Cosa Nostra.

Although alliances such as this, a bond between families was commonplace, in this regard, where the Bratva and Cosa Nostra were coming together for the “greater good” it wasn’t the norm. Not when we’d been battling for decades.

“We need to let all of those who think to rise up against us know what kind of power we have at our backs.”

And that’s exactly what this move was going to ensure. Anyone in the Bratva who thought to go against Dmitry or myself would see that not only were we vicious in going after what we wanted or taking out a threat, but we also had the west coast Cosa Nostra as a strong ally. And that kind of power would yield a union that was unstoppable.

I didn’t even know what my future wife looked like, didn’t know anything about her aside from her age and name. She could be a homely mouse for all I knew.

And I hadn’t cared enough to research her.

Because It didn’t matter what Amara Bianchi looked like, sounded like, or how she acted. She was a means to an end.

She was mine for better or worse.

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CHAPTER

THREE

Amara

I worried at my bottom lip as I stared at the laptop, watching as it seemed to take an eternity for the screen to load.

I felt like I was doing something wrong… searching the Internet for any piece of dirt I could find on my soon-to-be-husband.

Nikolai Petrov, a man notorious in the Russian Mafia as being insane, demented and dangerous.

I closed my eyes and exhaled. And God help me, I was to wed him.

I opened my eyes just as the page reloaded and as I clicked on one of the news articles, it was basically all the same information I found so far. Which is a whole lot of nothing that wasn't just for face value.

I knew enough about how organized crime worked, the Bradford in the Cosa Nostra not much different in that they did things only on the surface it looked good, while deep on the underground is where the real business happened

I clicked on an article for Nikolai Petrov and started reading.

Multi-millionaire heirs to the Petrov empire at only twenty nine and twenty eight, Dmitry and Nikolai Petrov, who have suspected ties to organized crime, have ventured into a new enterprise and renovated the Clandestine building on Fortworth Street in Desolation. It's predicted to be a top tier nightclub, and set to transform Desolation from the ground up.

I CONTINUED READING, clicking on another link that showed Nikolai and who I recognized as his older brother Dmitry. They were standing in front of a lavish door, *Sdat'sya* written above the wrought iron and wooden massive structure and giving it an almost ominous appearance.

I briefly looked at Dmitry, his light blue eyes bright yet they were also calculating. He'd seen a lot in his twenty-nine years.

I looked back at Nikolai then, feeling this strange tightness in my gut at the fact I'd be marrying him in the near future. Very near future if my father had his way.

His short dark hair was haphazardly strewn across his head, as if he ran his hands through it and didn't care how it looked. I felt like he probably didn't care about a lot of things. *Like humanity.* He had the same shade of blue eyes as Dmitry, a smirk on his face as he stared at the camera, as if he dared whoever was standing in front of them to take the picture.

My heart started racing, my throat tight and my mouth dry the longer I stared at him. I'd never spoken to him, never seen him in person, yet I felt this intense apprehension just from a picture alone. In fact, this was the first time I'd seen him in any capacity. I shouldn't find a man like him attractive, but I couldn't help the fact I did.

How would I feel once I was in the same room with him… alone with him?

It was enough to have fear striking me hard and fast.

I opened another article, getting pulled deeper and deeper into any and all things I could find on one of the Petrov Bratva heirs.

He had a younger sister--my age--named Tatiana. And strangely enough I couldn't find any clear images of her, as if she were hidden away from the public eye.

The last article I clicked on had my heart picking up an irregular beat as I read about Nikolai having a traffic incident where it's rumored he tore the finger and toenails off a man for cutting him off in traffic.

A knock on my bedroom door startled me and I slammed the laptop closed and pushed it under my pillow just as the door opened and my mother stepped inside.

I could see by the exasperated expression on her face and the way she was moving a little too quickly that she was nervous about whatever had

brought her into my room.

“Is everything okay, mamma?” She immediately walked toward my closet without responding, and started rifling through the dresses that were hung up. I heard her mutter under her breath, “*this won’t do*”.

I stood and started twisting my hands together, but with each passing second I was growing more anxious about what was going on.

“Mamma?” She stopped as if my voice had pierced through the muddled fog of her thoughts. She turned to face me and I felt my brows lower as I looked into her eyes. “What’s going on? Is Claudia okay? Gio--”

She waved her hand again, cutting me off, as if brushing my concern away. “No, your brother and sister are fine. Everything’s fine. It’s just the plans have… changed a little.”

I felt confusion fill me coupled with a good dose of apprehension. “Changed how?” As if my life wasn’t already a mess.

“Your father just got off the phone with the Petrov’s.”

My heart sank into my belly and I felt a rolling tide of nausea settle into me. The only thing worse than being tied to a man I didn’t love and had never met a single day in my life, was if he called off the engagement. It would bring shame upon my father, on our whole entire family. I’d be seen as tainted, worthless… not good enough to even be sold off by my family.

And *I* would be the sole reason for it all, even if I’d had nothing to do with it, even if I couldn’t have offended anyone aside from just simply breathing.

“Okay,” I said slowly. “What does that mean?”

I could see the tension around her eyes. “Your father got you a personal guard until the wedding, and then… she glanced around and looked at my closet once more. “And plans have moved up.”

My pulse raced and I shifted on my feet. I wasn’t surprised about the guard. We’d always had soldiers following us, men watching out for the Bianchi family whenever we left the house given who my father was. Marco Bianchi had many enemies, people who’d kill us to get to him.

But I’d never had a personal one myself. So that meant either there were threats that I’d never been privy to knowing that were too close to us, or maybe my father--or my future husband--was afraid something would happen to me… or that I’d run.

Not that the latter wasn’t something that would ever happen. I was too “watched”, and truthfully, too afraid to even try leaving. I had no money,

nothing of value. What was I supposed to do, live under a bridge, beg for change just so I could eat? I'd never survive, not with men out there who'd use and abuse me as much as the men in the mafia world would.

"What do you mean things have moved up?" I normally didn't press, but the words spilled out of me before I could stop them.

She turned back around without answering me and started pushing hangers aside, inspecting each dress. "This won't do. Not at all." She faced me once more. "We need to go dress shopping tomorrow." She nodded. "And we'll have lunch with Maria and her daughter. Keep up appearances." She sounded like she was speaking to herself.

With each passing second I was getting increasingly antsy, a lump forming in my throat as I thought about all the possible things that could go wrong… even more than they were.

"Have things been *canceled*?" I whispered that last word, holding onto hope, but also feeling a spike of fear. I didn't want this arranged marriage, but at the same time if Nikolai Petrov called off the wedding for whatever reason, I would be the one who suffered for it. The brunt of my father's wrath landing on my shoulder" because I wasn't "good enough."

"Dmitry Petrov called your father this afternoon, said he wants the engagement and wedding pushed up."

I swallowed roughly, not sure how to take that. I hadn't known when the wedding actually was, the only details I'd been told was that it was happening. For some reason I thought I'd have a long while before things went through, before everything was finalized. Weddings took a long time, right? Right?

Seemed like I'd been wrong.

"Nikolai and Dmitry Petrov are flying in this weekend. We're having dinner here." My mother smoothed her hands down her perfectly pressed dress. "They want to discuss a firm date for the wedding in person, and I'm sure Mr. Petrov wants to meet you officially."

I wasn't fool enough to think Nikolai cared anything about me, not about anything of importance. I'm sure he wanted to make sure I wasn't a homely spinster, or had a disfigurement. Not that any of that would stop him from this marriage, not when it meant more power all around.

The most pressing issue for him was probably that he wanted to get a feel of my father in his own atmosphere, to witness with his own eyes how

much power and connections Marco Bianchi actually had… how much Nikolai would gain by marrying into the Bianchi family.

I wanted to curse, wanted to deny it all and tell my mother I would not do this. But I was a good Italian girl. I had learned my place in this world, where I stood with my family. And so I pressed my lips together and kept all thoughts to myself. It was safer that way. Even if I trusted my mother, and knew she empathized with me, my disobedience--as my father would see it--would no doubt get back to him.

“Okay,” I finally said.

My mother gave a firm nod and faced my closet once more. “You need to make yourself presentable,” she said without looking at me. “You need to look your best so Mr. Petrov sees your worth.”

Yeah, like superficial beauty was all any female in this world had to offer.

“Amara, you need to meet the new guard your father will have with you until the wedding.” she started murmuring under her breath again.

“New guard? What about the ones I’ve used before?”

She started murmuring in Italian again as she looked at my closet. “No, no. They’ve been reassigned. More pressing issues, your father tells me. Your father wants you downstairs to introduce you to Edoardo. He’s been highly recommended by Lorenzo.”

I turned that information over in my head. “Lorenzo? Maria’s husband? Francesca’s father?”

My mother hummed her answer but otherwise didn’t say anything else.

“But why would Lorenzo just give up one of his men? Surely father has others?” Not that it mattered one way or another who watched over me, but I was curious on why my father would take another guard from one of his soldiers when I knew he had men at his disposal.

My mother glanced at me and scowled. “We don’t question what your father decides, especially when he wants you protected.”

I pursed my lips but otherwise said nothing else. I turned from my mother and walked over to the window, pulling the heavy curtain out of the way and looking outside. My bedroom faced the front of the house, the long, elaborate and winding driveway leading down to the wrought iron gate.

I felt like a caged bird in a beautiful prison.

No doubt right now my father would be working overtime to make sure everything was proper and perfect and in its rightful place before that dinner that would change everything.

My life wasn't my own. It never had been and it never would be, and that wouldn’t change because of who I married.

And Nikolai was no different than my father. In fact, I had a feeling he was even worse. The very devil himself.

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CHAPTER

FOUR

Amara

Shopping with my mother is basically me following her around as she tosses items into my arms as well as the guard who'd come with us. Today we had two of my father's men with us, Tomasso, my mother's guard, and Edoardo, the new guy my father had assigned to me until the wedding.

The man detailed to me was a kid, if I were being honest. He barely looked older than me.

Edoardo was an annoying shadow that I should have been grateful for because I knew he would protect me with his life. Not because he cared about me, but because he worked for my father, was paid by him, and feared for his own safety if he didn't uphold his duties.

My mother shoved a few more dresses into my arms and gently pushed me toward one of the changing rooms.

"Don't take too long, Amara. We have lunch with Maria and Francesca."

I stifled an eye roll at the sound of Maria's daughter's name. Francesca was spoiled by her father, and had a holier than thou attitude to match. But I was forced to be polite and grin and bear it because we ran in the same circle and drama was the last thing I needed.

Women using any kind of intellect or independent thought process in the mafia world didn't do any good. We were meant to be seen, not heard.

I tried on the dresses, doing the obligatory "showoff" for my mother. Once everything was paid for and our bags were in hand, we left the

boutique. Tomasso walked beside my mother, and Edoardo kept right behind me.

The sun was bright and I lifted my hand to shield my eyes. We made our way down the sidewalk, but it was only a few seconds before I felt this prickling on the back of my neck, and skating down the length of my spine. I found myself stopping and looking around, the very real feeling of being watched so pronounced it was impossible to ignore.

My mother and Tomasso continued forward, not realizing that I'd stopped, but Edoardo was a solid presence behind me as I glanced up and down the street.

There were a handful of cars driving by, and a dozen or so people walking up and down the sidewalks, shopping bags in hand, the unseasonably warm spring weather bringing them out.

But nobody seemed to be paying attention to me. Yet I couldn't shake the feeling that I was definitely being watched and not just in passing, but full-on staring at me enough I felt like it was a physical presence skating over me.

"What's the problem?" Edoardo's hard voice pierced through my thoughts and I blinked back to clear my mind, looking over my shoulder at him, my hand still shielding the sun from my eyes.

I noticed his hand started to go toward the inside of his jacket, and knew he was reaching for his gun. I felt my pulse race a little, because despite being surrounded by men like Edoardo and Tomasso, men who were like every other male in my life--brutal and savage and easily able to kill without remorse--I still found it shocking, appalling that somebody could be so coldhearted that they'd have no problem putting a bullet in someone in plain sight.

I shook my head. "Nothing," I murmured and started walking again to catch up to my mother.

But no matter how much or how far I walked, I still felt someone watching me and I knew what it was.

A predator.

"I'm sure it'll be a beautiful wedding. I bet you're so excited, Amara."

My name being said, dragged me from my thoughts and I looked across the table to see Maria smiling at me warmly. Her daughter might be stuck-up and cold, but Maria was as sweet as they came and I found myself giving her a genuine smile in return.

“Of course,” I lied easily.

I picked up my cup of tea and brought it to my mouth, not really tasting the flavor, and everything in me feeling numb. I listened idly to my mother and Maria talking, glancing over at Francesca to see her on her phone.

She had this sardonic little smirk on her face and then she looked at me, her expression telling me how much she *didn’t* want to be here.

I felt a pinch of annoyance, but she looked back at her phone, dismissing me.

I didn’t know how long we sat there, me tuning out everything except feeling the hot tea fill my mouth and go down my throat every time I took a sip from the cup.

But it was when I felt that tightening on the back of my neck once more, prickles along my arms, that I snapped back to reality and straight up my spine, glancing around the small cafe but not seeing anyone focused on us.

Tomasso stood in one corner of the room, his hands behind his back, his expression stern. Although he looked easy-going for the most part, I’d known Tomasso my entire life. I’d seen him beat a man on our front lawn simply for making an innocent comment about my mother’s beauty.

I glanced over at Edoardo, who stood by the front entrance, taking the same stance as Tomasso. He was staring right at me and I felt this cold chill race down my spine. And although I should’ve looked away I couldn’t, our gazes locked, his face so unforgiving and hard that it was as if I were staring at a lifeless husk.

I was the one to break eye contact and focused on the inside of my teacup, the tan colored liquid inside now only filling a fourth of the ceramic, dark sediment scattered along the bottom.

I still felt that heavy presence but ignored it. I could chalk up all of this, every nuance and feeling, every intrusive, fearful thought I had, all the anxiety, tension, anger and sadness that was consuming me since I found out about the arranged marriage, was slowly starting to crash in on me.

“So when’s the date set?” Maria asked and I glanced up to see her pick up her espresso, taking a sip from it as she stared at my mother. “Spring of next year? That’s when all the girls seem to be setting their wedding dates.”

When my mother didn’t answer right away I looked at her then. Seeing how my mother was picking at her linen napkins and shifting slightly on her chair told me everything I needed to know. She was nervous.

“We’re looking at something earlier.”

The way she was acting after Maria asked when the wedding date was, and her physical response, told me it seemed like everyone in my family knew when I was getting married except me.

And her evasive answer had dread settling in. *How early are we talking?*

But I knew better than to ask in front of anyone. Not that my mother would tell me even if we were alone. She may love me and want to protect and shield me from the horrors of our world as best she could, but she’d been beaten into submission for so long by my father that her loyalties—her fears—wild lean toward him. Always.

And telling me anything he hadn’t approved would be going against Marco Bianchi.

Even to the woman who birthed me I came second.

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CHAPTER

FIVE

Nikolai

I’d followed Amara after they left the Bianchi house half an hour ago. I parked across the street and watched them go into the boutique twenty minutes ago.

And I was still sitting here in my rental, a cigarette to my lips, and my cock harder than granite.

And all because of Amara Bianchi, my soon-to-be, barely legal wife who was fucking gorgeous.

To be honest, I’d been fucking surprised at how beautiful she was. Because Marco Bianchi wasn’t exactly a looker, not with his squat stature, overweight girth, and the arrogance that made him even uglier.

But once I’d seen Amara step out of her house, an older version of her following behind, I’d instantly felt the stab of lust at the sight of my eighteen year old fiancé. She had one lithe, tight little body, long black hair that brushed along her waist with every step she took, and then there was her flawless olive skin tone.

My dick had been hard since then, stabbing against the zipper of my jeans, and the fucker hadn’t gone down this entire time. I hadn’t seen her since she walked into the storefront, my fingers itching to reach down and pull my dick out and jerk off just to ease the pressure in my balls.

Her being gorgeous as fuck would sure as hell make this marriage far more bearable.

I brought the cigarette back to my lips and inhaled, pulled it away to exhale, then flicked the ash out the crack in the window. I finished off the

cigarette and made sure it was stubbed out before throwing it away. I focused on the store as I reached in my pocket for a pack of gum just as my cell phone went off.

After popping in a couple pieces of spearmint gum, I answered the call without looking at who it was. I knew it was Dmitry. He was the only asshole who had this number, and the only one who had the balls to call me.

"Yeah?" I barked out into the receiver and felt my body tense just as Amara came toward the glass, her focus on the street, her long dark hair draped over one shoulder.

All I could think about was the depraved, nasty things I wanted to do to her, how I'd tangle all that silky hair in my fist and yank her head back and bared throat. I'd bite at that creamy neck, leaving marks so everyone saw she was mine. We didn't need love or comfort. We only needed hardcore lust, and I sure as fuck had that in spades.

Visions of her on her knees with me forcing my cock in her mouth, down her throat, hearing her gag, feeling her muscles work against my shaft as I skull fucked her and told her how she was my dirty little whore. Only *mine* though. I'd never let anyone else have her, touch her, or even fucking look at her. I was a territorial fucker, proprietary, and Amara would be mine in every single fucking way that mattered.

If I pulled fingernails off some asshole for cutting me off in traffic, the psychotic shit I'd do to someone who even *thought* lewd things about Amara, I'd skin them alive.

As if she heard my thoughts, her head turned in my direction.

I knew she couldn't actually see me, not with the deeply tinted windows, but she was smart, had intuition and instinct to know she was being watched.

Even from a distance I could see how blue her eyes were, and I let my gaze linger down the slender swatch of her throat, down to the V-cut of her dress, and took in the feminine definition of her collarbones. Her breasts were on the smaller side, but fit her petite form to perfection. I reached down and adjusted my cock, gritting my teeth at how badly I wanted to jerk off right now.

"Are you even listening to me?"

I focused on my brother and rested my head back on the seat. "What?"

"Where are you?" Dmitry growled.

“Out.” I found myself looking back at the storefront, furrowing my brow when I didn’t see Amara standing there any longer.

“Yeah, asshole, obviously. Where? You left early and you know we have shit to do, reasons why we are even out here.”

“Yeah, I fucking know.” My voice was just as clipped as Dmitry’s. But my focus wasn’t on the whys or reasons we were here. I was solely focused on wanting another glimpse of my little Italian again.

I was now anxiously awaiting the weekend to get the wedding date set in place and to be in the same room as her. My cock twitched again as I thought about what would happen after that.

On the wedding night.

I’m going to fucking ruin her in the dirtiest way. I’m going to make her addicted to my touches, the smell of me, the very sight of me. She’ll be like Pavlov’s fucking dog, her pussy getting wet and primed at just the thought of me walking up to her.

I shouldn’t have been thinking about soiling such a beautiful, vulnerable girl. I knew she was innocent in all ways, the Cosa Nostra notorious for keeping their women under lock and key, their chastity intact to be used and sold off.

Although some factions of the Bratva held this barbaric tradition–my father being one of them–now that Dmitry and I had taken over the Desolation syndicate, we didn’t give a shit about that.

I never understood those outdated traditions, how a girl was only valuable if her hymen was still intact. I was under the mind frame of enjoying your youth and live however the fuck you wanted.

If someone wanted to gangbang their night away, more power to them. If someone wanted to pull out teeth and cut out a tongue for finding a rat in the ranks, hell, I'd be right there at the front of the line listening to them scream and beg for mercy.

Live and let live. Unless you fucked with us then we’d end you in the most torturous, twisted ways.

“I’d ask if you’re watching Marco, but I know that’s not the case since I have a few guys doing that,” Dmitry drawled and my focus was snagged once more at the front of the store, as if getting a glimpse of my breakable looking future wife got me off. “I hope like hell you’re not being a fucking creep and stalking Bianchi’s daughter.”

I smirked even though he couldn’t see me

“And if I am being a stalker? What do you care what I do? Not like you haven’t done some questionable things, big brother.” I kept my voice void of emotion.

I felt my muscles tighten as the door to the store opened and one of the guards stepped out. Marco’s wife Fernanda followed, her cell phone pressed to her ear, her mouth moving as she looked over her shoulder.

“I don’t care. Just reminding you I don’t want your crazy ass ruining this.”

I growled low and narrowed my eyes. “Fuck off. I know how important this union is. Hell, who’s idea was it, Dmitry?”

My brother snorted. “Just making sure you know what's at stake and the end goal, and that’s not getting your dick wet.”

Oh, that was for sure fucking part of it, and as if my cock agreed, the big length jerked once more behind my zipper.

I watched as Amara was the next to leave the boutique, the wind picking up and blowing the long fall of her dark hair around her face, the fabric of her modest dress molding to her body so I could make out the curves of her waist, the mounds of her breasts… and that feminine indentation between her legs.

At this rate I’d come right in my jeans without even having to touch the fucker.

“I’ll be where I need to be. Don’t worry.” I ended the call before Dmitry could hammer me with any more questions, and shoved the phone back in my pocket. Not that he cared what I did normally, but this situation was different. It meant a huge power surge in our direction, would get any stragglers in line after our father’s death.

When Amara and her guard were out of the store, the door closing behind them, they all started walking down the street. I noticed how Edoardo, her weak as fuck little guard didn’t even stop himself from checking out my fiancé’s ass. I’d have to remember to give him two black eyes for that shit.

When Amara suddenly stopped I trained my focus back on her. Her shoulders pulled back as she looked up and down the street.

A slow, predatory grin spread across my face.

I got off on her very evident apprehension.

Her gaze skated over the rental I was in, staring at it for just a second before she looked away. *She felt me.*

I wasn’t done following her, watching her… thinking about all the filthy, degrading things I’d do to her. She’d cry for me and I’d lick her tears, drag my tongue along her face and taste all that fucking fear and sadness.

Maybe all of that shouldn’t have brought me as much pleasure as it did, knowing she was uneasy right now because she could sense my gaze on her, probably *felt* that sliver of fear, that tingle of warning.

Oh… I was going to have fun with her.

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CHAPTER

SIX

Amara

The day of the dinner had the staff bustling around and my father barking out orders. I could feel the tension radiating off of him whenever I was within a five foot radius of him. He was nervous, that was painfully obvious. And it was strange seeing my father so worked up, so on edge over something like this.

Dinner.

I'd seen him upset, rigged and on the verge of seeming like he would murder the next person who crossed him. But tonight was supposed to be just a formal dinner between my family and my future husband. So the fact my father was so tense over this? Told me he feared the Petrov brothers. No doubt didn't trust them either

My father wasn't one to feel fear easily, so seeing him show it, actually let it manifest so it was visible to all who had eyes… that in itself worried me. Because if a man like my father was anxious around Nikolai and his brother, what hope was there for me to make it out alive?

If I stayed in the house one more second, feeling that pressure grow all around me, I was going to snap.

I left my room and walked down the stairs, my feet barely making any sound over the plush floor runner. I passed many servants, but they ignored me otherwise, and when I got to the landing and headed for the front door, I wasn't surprised to see Edoardo move out from the hallway.

I wanted to snap that I didn't need him to watch me. I was home, with so much security around that I was drowning in it. But I kept my mouth

shut and ignored him. I didn't like the way he looked at me, staring at me with this slimy gaze.

Once outside I felt his heavy presence behind me, the sound of the door clicking shut seeming overly loud. For just a second I closed my eyes and inhaled, the promise of spring in the air enough to drive away the chill when the wind picked up.

Adjusting my cardigan so it was a little tighter around my chest, I walked forward, wanting to look at the fruit trees at the front of the property by the main gate and see if there were any new blossoms.

I could hear the steady footfalls from Edoardo behind me, and looked over my shoulder, confirming he was right there, yet he did give me some personal space.

There were several gardeners working on the property, making sure the bushes were trimmed, the landscaping just perfect. The soft soles of my flats kicked up some of the decorative pebbles as I made my way toward the line of fruit trees.

Once I got to the line of trees I weaved my way in and out of them. They were pretty sparse, bare for this time of year, but I didn't care. I just wanted out of the house, wanted to get away from all the chaos and hectic atmosphere that was all because my life was irrevocably, dramatically changing.

I stopped and ran my fingers over the bark of an apple tree, the texture slightly rough, chilled from the cold air. I trailed my fingers along the branches, imagining the leaves filling it out this summer. Sound to my left had me looking at the massive gate that lined our entire property. From the ground to about waist high was decorative stone, then that's when the intricately twisted wrought iron bars started and climbed up about fifteen feet.

I could hear Edoardo start a low conversation with the guard at the gate, and glanced over my shoulder to see their heads angled forward as they spoke in hushed voices. I focused on the trees again, looking at the branches, and reached up, rising on my toes, to touch the small buds that were starting to sprout along the spindle lengths.

It was only a moment before the sun caught something, causing a glint to draw my attention back to the gate. I saw a sleek black luxury car with darkly tinted windows drive-by. It wouldn't have had me take notice

otherwise, but because it was moving at a slow–creepily speed–had the hair on the back of my neck standing on end.

Although we didn't live in an exclusively private area, with houses having about an acre between each, and our home in particular was situated across from a thick line of woods. That meant car traffic down this road wasn't frequent.

I found myself glancing at Edoardo again, but he was still immersed in a quiet conversation with the gate guard. My focus went back to the car, which was now completely stopped just ahead of me, the vehicle idling, the low hum of the engine speaking of wealth, it was almost silent.

I felt my heart jerk in my chest the longer I stared at the car. I couldn't see who was inside with how dark the windows were tinted, but I felt whoever was in there watching me. It took me back to earlier, that same feeling I'd had as I stepped out of the boutique, the same sensation I'd experienced at the cafe.

It seemed like time stood still, but I knew only moments had passed, seconds of this almost stare-off with this strange vehicle. And then it was gone, disappearing down the road and around the corner. Only then did I exhale, letting out the tensions that had been slowly growing in those short seconds. I knew I should tell someone, Edoardo at the least, but a little voice whispered no, to keep it to myself.

I had turned and made my way back to the house before I realized I was moving, wanting to go in my room, shut the door and lock myself away from everyone and everything.

Yet I couldn't shake the feeling of almost… anticipation settling deep inside of me.

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CHAPTER

SEVEN

Amara

I was being tugged at, plucked, shaped into what my mother and father saw as the perfect Italian girl for my future husband.

And all I could do was stand there, staring at myself in the full length mirror as servants bustled around me, smoothing out nonexistent wrinkles in my dress, making sure every curl, every hair was in its place. My makeup had been done twenty minutes ago, a subtle, natural look that accentuated my beauty, or so my mother said.

They were murmuring and under their breath, a string words on how they wanted everything to be perfect "*per Master Bianchi's orders*". And I just stood there like a doll that they could prep and primp, not feeling anything, not seeing anything.

There was a soft knock at my bedroom door and then my mother was coming in, speaking in Italian to the servants, ushering them out and coming to stand behind me, her delicate sized hands resting on my shoulders. She was only about an inch taller than my five-foot-five frame, but even still I couldn't meet her gaze. There was a lump in my throat, an ache in my chest, and full pressure in my belly.

"Dmitry and Nikolai Petrov have arrived and are downstairs in your father's cigar room," she said softly and I nodded once, licking my lips and continuing to stare at my reflection.

My mother had picked out the dress I was currently in, an emerald green full length one that she said complimented my olive complexion and dark hair beautifully. It was long sleeved, with a scalloped collar that

dipped right underneath my collarbone bones, an attribute my father always said hinted at femininity.

Although it was form fitting and showed the slight swells of my breasts, the dips of my hips, and the flare of my waist, it was still modest, the skirting fell to my ankles, keeping the majority of my skin covered so I seemed innocent. Virginal. Because that was, after all, the biggest selling point. My inexperience. My lack of anything and everything sexual.

I'd never been alone with the opposite sex who wasn't hired by my father to guard me, who wasn't a family member. I'd been sheltered and sequestered away until all I could do was gather my worldly experience from the many books in the library, from the hushed whispering and gossiping of the staff.

"Mr. Petrov will be stunned when he sees your beauty, Amara." She moved her hands down my shoulders and gripped my upper arms gently. "He'll treat you well." I could hear the hopeful tone in her voice. Was she trying to convince me or herself?

I said nothing, just nodding like a good Italian daughter who knew her place even if all she wanted to do was scream and curse and break everything. I had so much bottled-up emotion, so much anger and rage that I wanted to hurt someone, something.

I wanted everyone else to feel my frustration.

"Come *passerotta*,"my mother said and gently placed her hand on the small of my back to lead me out of my room.

Once we made it to the top of the stairs I could hear deep voices filtering up from my father's cigar room. I reached out and gripped the banister, curling my fingers tightly around it, digging my nails into the wood. My heart was thundering, my throat tightened and my mouth went dry.

There was a deep rumble of laughter and I felt this tightening in my chest, something that didn't have anything to do with fear but of anticipation. Was that Nikolai's voice? Would he be as intimidating in person as he was in the images I was just looking at?

My mother led the way, clicking her tongue for me to get going like I was a show horse. I guess I was to them, in a way.

I realized we were standing in the opened doorway of my father's cigar room before I realized I'd even moved. My mother's hand rested on the center of my back, and my focus was on my father first, who held a square-

cut glass of amber colored liquid in his hand. He leaned against his oak desk, a cigar between the fingers of his other hand. He laughed deeply and I let my gaze slide to the two men who stood a few feet across from him and beside the fireplace mantle.

And as if our silent presence was a heavy weight in the room, all conversation between the men ceased and their attention latched right onto me. And *my* gaze was locked on one man specifically, as if we were two magnets and I was helpless to fight the pull.

His short dark hair was in a disarray around his head, brushing his forehead as if he'd been running his fingers through it. Or maybe how he looked when he woke up in the morning, or how he looked after he…

I pushed those obscene thoughts away as I felt my face heat, no doubt painting my flesh crimson.

His masculine square jaw was covered in a dark shadow of scruff, and no man should have lips that full. I wasn't even ashamed at how deeply I was looking at him, how I took in his straight, angular nose, or how his eyes were so blue they were a stark contrast to his darker tones.

Even if I hadn't known what he looked like before meeting him in person, his visible reaction to my presence tipped me off that he was my future husband.

His jaw clenched slightly, his nostrils flared suddenly. I saw a tightening of his fingers around the bourbon glass he held, and there was no mistaking the way he checked me out, his gaze roaming up and down my body.

Despite wearing a demure, modest dress, I felt completely naked at that moment as his gaze moved up and down my body.

"Amara," my father said in a tone that he'd never used with me before. Gentle.

He held his hand out and beckoned me.

I felt a nudge from behind, my mother gently pushing me further into the room. I took a couple steps forward and looked over my shoulder at her. She stood in the doorway, hands clasped in front of her, her head down. The perfect submissive Italian wife for my father. It made me nauseous.

"Amara," my father's voice turned a little harder, a little sterner.

I knew my lack of obeying him right away angered him, and if the Petrov's weren't here right now I'd have a red mark on my cheek in the shape and size of my father's palm.

I faced forward once more and made my way over to him quickly, finding it hard to breathe the longer I was in the room with these three men. He gripped my upper arm harder than necessary and I couldn't stop the wince. I noticed the subtle tightening of Nikolai's shoulders, the slight narrowing of his eyes as his gaze landed on where my father held onto me.

My father turned me so I was facing the two Petrov's and let go of me. Dmitry leaned against the edge of the mantle, a smirk on his face as he brought his glass to his mouth and took a long drink. But then my focus was locked on Nikolai once more, as if I had no control.

I was lost in his blue eyes, and in his imposing, intimidating demeanor. God, he was big, tall and muscular, broad shoulders and a hard body that couldn't be hidden behind his leather jacket, dark shirt, and black jeans.

I felt dizzy, woozy even, as if I were staring directly into the sun but unable to look away. Of course I felt fear. But it was more akin to being afraid of the unknown and not so much that he'd destroy me. Although I wasn't confident the latter wouldn't happen.

"Amara, I'd like to officially introduce you to your fiancé, Nikolai Petrov." My father's voice was even, slightly saccharine. And Marco Bianchi could have never been called sweet or amicable.

I had no doubts these two Russians knew the type of man Marco was, the things he'd done, the lengths he'd gone to get what he wanted. I knew they were well aware of this because they were all one in the same.

My father was brutal and savage in all aspects of his life. That's how he'd gotten into the position of Capo of the West Coast Cosa Nostra.

I glanced at my father once more, watching as he tipped back the rest of his bourbon. I had a feeling that wasn't his first and certainly wouldn't be his last. From the little I knew about the Cosa Nostra and Bratva, I was aware of the tension that had always been between them, the decades long war and strife, vengeance and revenge always seeming to go back and forth.

All the blood that had been spilled by both sides.

And as I saw the glossy look in my father's eyes, the slightly tint of pink to his cheeks, I wondered if this was what my father looked like when he was happy as he sold-off his daughter in a power-play.

It was just one of the many questions I'd never get an answer to.

I nodded even though no one asked anything of me. I wanted to ask when the wedding date was, and how soon we were talking, but I knew better than to open my mouth and voice that.

The sound of liquid being poured into a glass told me my father was getting a refill he didn't need.

And during all of this Nikolai and I held eye contact. Just a look from him made me feel unbalanced and nervous… bared so that I couldn't hide anything from his knowing gaze.

"Don't you want to know when our wedding is?" Nikolai's voice was a deep rumble. Although he had an American accent, I did pick up on a slight Russian one, almost inaudible aside from when he pronounced certain words.

"She'll go along with whatever date is set," my father answered and I looked at him, seeing him staring down into his bourbon, a scowl on his face.

"I didn't ask you," Nikolai said in a deep, dark tone.

I snapped my head in his direction, feeling my eyes widen. People didn't speak to Marco that way, least of all in his own home.

The room became deathly quiet with the only sound being that of the crackling fire. I let my gaze slip to Dmitry and saw him smirk just as he brought his glass back to his mouth and finished off his liquor.

"I was talking to my future wife. My fiancé, Marco."

I bit the inside of my cheek as Nikolai used my father's first name, something that would be deemed as disrespectful in his eyes. But my father said nothing, and although I could feel the coldness blasting out of him, his anger tangible, his silence meant one thing.

He was afraid of Nikolai, of what this man, his organization could do. The power they wielded.

"Well, go on girl. Answer him." My father's voice was clipped and I could feel his gaze on me although I didn't look at him.

I twisted my fingers together in front of me, knowing I should probably take a submissive stance and lower my head in respect, break eye contact with Nikolai, yet it was as if he were silently willing me to meet him head on, to not back down. And that had a surge of sureness and my own power moving through me.

Show him I was stronger than people gave me credit for. And so I straightened my spine and tipped my chin, holding Nikolai's gaze and seeing his expression clearly showing approval coupled with a little tilt at the corner of his mouth as he smirked.

“Don’t you want to know when we’re getting married, Amara?” He asked again and I suppressed a shiver at the sound of my name falling from his lips, his Russian accent seeming thicker now as he rolled those syllables around.

I felt slightly ashamed and uncomfortable for feeling a flash of desire at that, especially standing in a room with two strangers and my father. And I quickly realized just being in Nikolai’s presence made everything else fade away so I didn't really care about anything else or what anyone thought.

It was liberating.

I licked my lips and found myself glancing at my father as if instinctively being pulled to garner his approval.

“Don’t look at him, *krasavitsa*.” Although Nikolai’s voice was stern and demanding like my father could be, it also held a different note in it.

I couldn’t place it, but I knew it made me feel a certain kind of way that had my thighs clenching together and my face heating even more. And I did find myself obeying, staring once more at Nikolai, feeling everything else fade away.

“Answer the question for me.” He took a step forward and although he was only a few feet away, I could smell the spicy, dark scent of whatever cologne he wore.

I inhaled deeply, not realizing I’d done the act, took in his scent, until I was barely able to stop the soft sound of… what? Neediness? Desperation? Arousal?

“When?” That one word was breathless from me, barely audible, but he gave me another one of those far too sexy corner mouth smiles.

“When, what, *krasavitsa*?” He took another step forward and I felt how tight my muscles were, as if I were anticipating… something.

I licked my lips and noticed his gaze dropped down to watch the act before he slowly, lewdly dragged his focus back up to my eyes. “When is the wedding?” For a prolonged second after I asked the question Nikolai didn’t speak, just continued to watch me. And then he smirked.

“A month from today,” Nikolai finally said matter-of-factly.

The air left me so violently I stumbled back, my father’s desk stopping my fall. “Next month?” My voice was strained.

“Get yourself under control, girl.” My father hissed. “Stop being dramatic.”

I felt like we were all silent for so long, only the sound of my racing heart filling my ears. But then I blinked myself back into focus and heard my father speaking to Nikolai, his tone sterner now. I knew it was because Nikolai had offended him with the way he spoke to my father, a disrespect Marco probably would never get over.

I tuned out everything else as I focused on the fire. The room, scene, conversation… all of it drowned out as my pulse pounded in my ears once more.

"Because the date of the wedding has been pushed up, we'll have to forgo an engagement party." My father's voice brought me back to focus and I looked at him.

I chanced a look at him to see his jaw clenched as he looked at the other men. Clearly this change of date and plans made my father upset. I knew how he felt.

And I knew it was all because people would talk, gossip. The rumors would spread on why the wedding had been pushed up, why there wasn't an engagement party to announce the celebrations officially.

They'd think I was tarnished, tainted. Pregnant out of wedlock, perhaps.

More talking, more tuning out.

"That's all, Amara," my father snapped and I straightened, not sure what he had said before that, but knowing a dismissive tone when I heard it.

I turned and started walking toward the door but didn't realize how close Nikolai was until I felt my shoulder brush against his hard chest. I felt a jolt of electricity move through me but was pretty proud of myself for not letting it visibly affect me as much as I wanted it to. I looked at him then, his gaze locked on me, his expression showing so much… *promise*.

I left my father's office and closed the door softly. I took a few steps away from the room and found myself leaning against the wall, my eyes closed, my palms flat behind me on the damask wallpaper, the texture cold and almost grounding me.

I felt dizzy, nauseous. I was getting married one month from today. How had I gone from my father telling me I was part of an arranged marriage to the wedding being thrown together this quickly?

Of course I wasn't a fool. I knew there were other things in place which had accelerated the date, things I'd never be privy to. Things I probably never wanted to even know about.

I opened my eyes and stared at the arched ceiling, the light from the chandelier in the foyer casting a glow down the hallway. If I went right I'd go back toward the front doors, then take the stairs and lock myself in my room.

Instead I found myself taking a left, wanting to go outside, to get fresh air, to look at the sky and clear my head. I knew Edoardo would find me sooner or later, but when I was at home he gave me a little bit of breathing room, wasn't right on my heels because of all the cameras and security that my father had in place.

I'd only made it about ten feet before I heard a door behind me open and close, and then heard the heavy sound of footsteps coming up behind me. I was just about to stop and look over my shoulder, assuming it was my father about to berate me for being too "dramatic" in front of Nikolai and Dmitry, but just as I was about to turn I felt a heavy body press against me and use their strength to move me until my back hit the wall.

I was now situated in a corner alcove, the light not penetrating the space so it was filled with shadows blocking the view of anyone who happened to pass by.

I gasped and craned my neck to look into a pair of bright blue eyes, Nikolai's expression hard, unreadable. Although he used his body to corral me where he wanted, he wasn't touching me any longer, now about a foot between us, his body heat slamming into me and making it hard to breathe.

"W—what are you doing?" My voice was barely audible, nothing but a breathless sound leaving my parted lips. My heart was thundering in my chest, threatening to burst free of my ribs, and I felt jittery, adrenaline pulsing through my veins, the flight or fight instinct running hard in me.

He tipped his head to the side as he looked down at me, the shadows wrapping around the sharp planes of his square-cut jaw. And still he didn't speak, didn't answer me.

My entire body jolted when I saw him lift his arm, and then my gaze was latched onto his hand, which rose higher and higher until his hand was close to my face. But he didn't touch me, not for long seconds. I stared into his eyes, not able to breathe or think.

It was when I felt his fingers gently stroking along my upper arm that I snapped my head down, not even realizing he'd moved his hand back down.

“Not breaking his hand for touching you was really hard, *kukolka*.” His voice was low and deep, sinister in the way he said the words. “Yes, that’s what you are, isn’t it?” It sounded like he spoke to himself, murmuring the words low and deep and so very heady. “My little doll.” He looked at my mouth again. “*Krasavitsa,” he murmured.* “Beauty.”

I looked up but saw he was watching his hand on my arm, still felt his thumb brushing back and forth. He lifted his focus back to my face then and I held my breath.

“I showed more self-control in front of your father than I ever have in my life.” Still the brushing of his thumb back and forth. “But my brother said I needed to be on my best behavior and all that.” Back and forth. Back and forth. He slowly grinned. “First impressions and all that.” His accent seemed deeper, richer now, his thumb still sweeping over my fabric covered arm. “But he shouldn’t have put his hands on you, father or not,” he ground out, his jaw clenching as I *felt* his anger. “I’m the only one who will ever touch you.” He leaned in close so our mouths were almost touching. “But only to make you come.”

I gasped in shock at his words just as he took a step back, his hand falling from my arm. I found myself lifting my hand and rubbing where he’s just been touching me. Even through the fabric of my dress it felt like my skin was scorched in the best way.

In a way his touch, his words and his body heat made me feel dirty and wrong and... feelings I wanted more of.

“Until dinner, *kukolka*.” And with an arrogant grin he turned and left me leaning against the wall still shrouded in shadows and wondering what in the hell had just happened.

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CHAPTER

EIGHT

Nikolai

I brought the glass tumbler to my mouth and drained the rest of it as I stared at Amara Bianchi. She was a sight, a fucking gorgeous, innocent female that I couldn't wait to dirty up.

Although I knew she was a virgin—something her disgusting piece of shit father had boasted about, as if that were the cherry on the top of this arranged fucking marriage. It didn't matter if she'd been with anyone before. This was a marriage of convenience only.

Or it had been until I saw her for the first time, until I realized how much fun I was going to have taking my innocent, virginal wife in every obscene, lewd way imaginable. I'd never been possessive of anything in my life, yet the very thought of anyone touching Amara, desiring her, *thinking* that they could ever have her, had a dark rage filling me.

It made the murderous side rise up greedily. The thoughts alone were enough to make me go out and slaughter someone for potentially thinking about her.

The only time my hard-on had gone done was when I stepped into the room with Marco. Fucker could make anybody's blood pressure drop just from having to deal with his arrogant ass. But then as soon as Amara had come in my deflated cock had become semi-hard instantly.

And I hadn't cared to try and hide it, didn't even bother adjusting myself. I didn't know if anybody had seen how hard my cock was getting, how the fucker tented my pants.

I continued to stare at Amara, smirking at the fact she'd refused to look at me since we'd sat down for dinner. I knew I probably shouldn't have approached her after she left her father's office, really shouldn't have called her those little pet names.

And when her bastard of a father at point-blank asked me if I Amara was "sufficient" for me, as if she were a piece of fucking steak I was buying from the butcher. I hadn't given a shit about formalities.

I was protective of her instantly, and hearing her father speak to her as if she meant nothing pissed me the fuck off. I'd left without saying shit to my brother or Marco, just turned and left right in the middle of Bianchi's ramblings and went after his barely legal daughter.

Clenching my teeth as I got enraged all over again, I forced myself to look away from my pretty fiancé and narrowed my eyes at her father. Amara's mother looked depressing as she sat beside Marco, the woman as dainty as her daughter, but I could tell she'd been trained to be quiet and obedient. Meek.

That wasn't something I wanted in my life. I wanted a wife that had a passion and fire to match my own chaos.

And I saw that burning in Amara's eyes the short time we'd been in each other's presence. She knew her place in our world, but she also had a spark, a fire of life behind her eyes that turned me on. Excited me, like a predator who just spotted a gazelle anticipated the hunt.

Her brother Gio sat on the other side of Marco, and Amara's younger sister Claudia sat beside her mother. When I looked at my pretty fiancé I felt a stab of lust that she was looking at me out of the corner of her eye. I held back a grin, not sure why I was so pleased she showed interest in me.

It would make all of this easier, make our time together when we were alone and I had her naked and spread for me all that more pleasurable.

I thought back to when I'd cornered her in that alcove, both of us hidden by shadows so it was just the two of us. I swore I'd smelled the sweet scent of her wet pussy as I inhaled deeply, as I held her arm and stroked her gently, as I watched her pupils become blown from her desire when I told her *I'd be the only one* to touch her as I brought her pleasure.

That had been a bastard thing to say to her, so sweet and innocent that she'd never heard such filth in her life. And fuck, that wasn't even dirty by my standards. I had a shitload of nasty stuff I wanted to tell her… make her do. Do to her.

Fuck, my cock jerked in approval at all of that.

My skin tightened, a sensation I had when I was being watched, and I let my gaze move away from Amara to look at Gio. The bastard's focus was trained on me and he didn't bother concealing his disapproval. I lifted my glass up and tipped it in salute to him before downing the rest of it.

Staring at Amara's brother, I lifted the now empty glass, signaling the wait staff to refill it. A second later I was topped-off and taking another pull of liquor. If the bastard thought he could be intimidating by glaring at me, he didn't know nearly enough about who and what I was.

If he thought the fucking Cosa Nostra was dangerous, he hadn't seen anything yet. As if he read my thoughts he narrowed his eyes and clenched his jaw. I suppressed my laugh when I heard Dmitry growl low in his throat, a warning for me to behave.

I looked at my brother and lifted an eyebrow, silently telling him I thought I was doing pretty fucking well at being a gentleman. I'd never given a shit about what anyone thought or said, and certainly didn't abide by rules and "behave". But because an alliance with the West Coast Cosa Nostra was important to our organization, I was going against the grain here and listening to "reason".

I looked back at Amara, a stab of lust slamming into me when I saw her blue eyes trained right on me. She looked away quickly and I could see her shoulders tense. But I continued to stare at her, knowing she felt me watching her.

I liked making her feel on edge, a little uncomfortable. It turned me on to know she thought how I acted, how I blatantly watched her was no doubt inappropriate.

I leaned back in my chair and kept sipping on my liquor, filtering out the conversation around as I blatantly eye-fucked her in front of her entire family. But I didn't give a shit who saw me or what they thought. She'd be mine soon enough by law and tradition, hell, she pretty much already was mine since the engagement was official between her father and me.

She brought up a piece of fruit from her salad and I watched as she brought it to her mouth, her lips closing delicately over the fork as she pulled the bit of strawberry off.

My cock jerked hard at the sight of that, at the thought that I'd have her on her knees, the plump pink lips suctioned around my cock, her gaze trained on my face as I forced her to take it all.

I’d throat fuck the hell out of her, watch as tears streamed down her throat because I wouldn’t be gentle, wouldn’t give her time to get accustomed to my huge dick. I could all but hear the sound of her gagging as I envisioned shoving into her mouth so deep she’d swallow around the crown obscenely.

I was going to have fun with her. Fuck, I was going to ruin her for anyone else but me.

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CHAPTER

NINE

Amara

I stared at myself in the mirror, not recognizing the woman looking back at me. The wedding dress was gorgeous, the white lace and Swarovski crystals weaved into the silk, the fabric molding around my curves and hinting at my womanhood.

Although most of my skin was covered so it was still modest and showed my innocence, it also would let everyone know I was a woman now, with a womanly body that only my husband would ever get to enjoy.

Those thoughts had my belly clenching.

It was a gorgeous dress even if I didn't pick it out, even if I didn't have a choice. In any of this. But what difference did it make? It's not like I'd be wearing it for more than a day anyway, the material probably ripped off my body by Nikolai as soon as we made it into the hotel because he was a beast.

I closed my eyes and breathed as that thought conjured up a hundred different images of what would happen on my wedding night. I wasn't stupid enough to think Nikolai would take his time with me, that he'd be gentle, that he'd make love to me. I was sure he wasn't a virgin and experienced. He'd probably pleased more women than I'd be able to comprehend.

For the past three weeks I hadn't been able to stop thinking about Nikolai, about our inappropriate, impromptu alcove meeting where he touched me, where we'd shared that forbidden act. I could still smell his cologne, had even shamelessly thought about touching myself when I was

alone in bed at night to the memory of how dark and spicy it had been, how it wrapped around me.

I'd pictured his big body hovering over mine, and imagined how it would feel to have his body heat pouring off his naked, muscular form and seeping into me, surrounding me.

When I blinked back to the present and stared at my reflection, I noted my pinked cheeks, my dilated pupils. I was aroused. And all from a thought of that Russian beast.

I lifted my hands and smoothed them down my flat belly, along my curved waist, and stopped right under my small breasts. My focus was trained on my left hand, at my bare ring finger that soon would be bound with gold and a diamond. I didn't even know what my ring was going to look like, didn't know anything about my future husband aside from the basics that I had found myself.

My father certainly hadn't given me any kind of background. But because Nikolai was in the Bratva I knew he was probably even worse than the men I'd known my entire life. I'd seen the cold calculation in his bright blue eyes, as if his mind had been working out every possible scenario and outcome of a situation.

A knock on the dressing room door drew me from my thoughts. Before I could tell them to enter the door was being pushed open. I felt surprise fill me when it was Francesca who entered, her gaze raking up and down me. Surprisingly enough there was appreciation in her expression.

"Not bad," she said almost dismissively and I bit my tongue in a retort.

It wasn't that I was weak or couldn't stand up for myself. I just knew I had to pick my battles, and the only thing I'd accomplish going head-to-head with Francesca was severe annoyance.

I just didn't have the energy to deal with her and everything else going on in my life. If she wanted to think she was better than me or everyone else, that was the energy she would have to put out.

She stood there looking me up and down for a second before she took a seat on the padded chair in the corner of the room. For long moments neither of us said anything and I was hoping someone would interrupt the awkward silence that descended in the dressing room

"Are you nervous?" she asked and I looked back at my reflection.

Francesca sounded pleasant enough, and dare I even say, genuinely curious. But I knew where her thoughts were going right now.

She was my age and her father would be marrying her off in the same way in the very near future.

I watched as she lowered her gaze to the ground and saw how she picked at the hem of her dress almost nervously. She was scared because as she looked at me I knew what she saw.

Her future.

Francesca was a bitch, a mega one, and a small part of me wanted to feel sympathy for her. Because if we were in opposite places right now all I'd be able to think about was when it would be *my time* to stand in front of this mirror as I looked at myself wearing my wedding dress.

Of course I didn't even have to think about her question or the answer. I'd been thinking about all the things regarding this wedding for almost a month now.

I licked my lips and continued to stare at myself in the mirror, smoothing my hands down the dress, letting my fingers trail over the lace detailing. "I'm terrified," I whispered so softly I wasn't sure she heard me.

"I can't think of anything worse than marrying someone you don't love."

I furrowed my brow at her tone. She sounded like she was speaking from experience. But surely that wasn't the case since she wasn't married off yet. She'd be locked away, keeping that precious virginity intact until her father could use her as a pawn.

Francesca's expression morphed into irritation the longer I watched her. *There is the girl I knew so well.* So cold and hateful. She would probably be a better match for Nikolai.

And when she smirked I forced myself to break eye contact with her, knowing she was about to go to her default and be cruel.

"Are you ready for your wedding night?"

I didn't bother answering, just kept smoothing my hands down my dress.

"I don't think anyone is ready for their wedding night, especially not when you're getting married to a killer."

I swallowed roughly and her blunt, coarse words. Of course I knew this to be fact, but I felt irritation fill me. I looked at her then and she must have seen something in my expression because her body visibly tensed.

"No, I doubt it," I said and let those words hang in the air between us. "I'm sure your mother felt the same way when she was forced to marry

your father.” I felt this fire burn inside of me, knew I should have shut my mouth, but the words just kept spilling out. “And I’m sure you’ll feel the same thing when your father pawns you off, just like mine is doing to me.” Neither one of us spoke for so long I didn’t think she’d ever respond. But when her nostrils flared slightly I knew I’d hit a nerve.

Her lips pursed so tightly there was a thin line of white around her lips. “It hurts the first few times.”

I knew she was looking for a reaction, saying these things for shock value, pissed that I’d called her out that my fate was hers. Although I was a virgin it wasn’t as if I didn’t know the fundamental basics of sex or what happened on a wedding night. My mother had hinted to it over the past couple weeks, but she’d been too timid to go into the hard details of it all.

So I’d made it a mission to eavesdrop when my brother would talk with some of the guards and what he did with the girls he’d been with. I overheard staff talking about what they did with their partners in hushed detail that my face had heated unbearably.

If she was looking for a reaction she wouldn't get one. Not about this.

“Yeah, the first couple times hurt like hell, and of course blood. A lot of blood in my case.” I felt my eyes widen at her admission, but she kept talking. “Let’s hope your future Russian beast of a husband takes pity on you and doesn’t just push you on the bed, spread you open, and rut between your thighs like the animal I’m sure he is.”

She shrugged and looked down at her nails, examining them as if she found a chip in her new manicure.

“But that’s how these men are, aren’t they when they don’t care about you.” Her voice was soft, almost as if she spoke to herself. “Some of us are just a vessel for them to shove deep inside and fill with their babies.”

When she looked at me there was a nasty smile on her face. “Have you heard some of the things your future husband has done?”

Maybe I hadn’t kept my mask in place well enough because when her smile widened I clenched my jaw.

“He’s ruthless, and finds sport in killing his enemies. And you know what they say about the Russians, how barbaric they are, how they use and abuse their women.” She shrugged again and smoothed her hands down her dress. “I’m sure it won’t be any different with Nikolai Petrov. He probably likes it when the women he fucks bleeds and cries.”

I turned and faced her then. “How do you know all this?” Of course I wasn’t stupid and had heard her words, how it sounded like she was telling me all of this from experience. But surely that wasn’t her truth? Surely she hadn’t experienced it firsthand?

She didn’t answer for long moments and it was her expression that told me the truth. She knew these things because she’d done them. She wasn't just saying it to shock me, wasn’t fabricating any of it to be a bitch.

“When I get married it’ll be to someone I love and who loves me back.” Her tone of voice told me she honestly believed that.

I didn’t bother correcting her, reminding her that in our world there was no “marriage for love”. *Let her believe what she wants.*

“Francesca,” I said softly. “You know the rules of our world. You know we have to follow them.” I forced the words past my lips. They tasted sour, toxic. I felt like a robot just regurgitating what had been beaten into me since I was old enough to understand words.

She didn’t say anything but her expression hardened, her red painted lips pinching. “I know what the rules are. I know what’s expected of me.” The words were hard, growing louder with every syllable.

I’d never seen or heard Francesca speak so passionately about something.

“But I also know what I want. And I’m not going to settle. I have plans, plans that don’t involve being shoved onto someone I don’t want.” With that she pulled her shoulders back, tipped her chin up and snubbed nose at me. She raked her gaze up and down me, her lip curling as if I were weak and beneath her for “following the rules”.

I said nothing else as I watched her leave the dressing room, shutting the door behind her harder than necessary.

For a second I just stood there, the only thing running through my mind was my own thoughts and everything she said being repeated like a broken record. I faced the mirror once more and thought about what she said, about finding love, knowing what you wanted and not settling.

But I also knew reality. I faced it. And I knew fairytales and a happily ever after with my prince charming had never been in the books for me.

All I could do was accept my fate and hope that the outcome at least had me somewhat happy.

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CHAPTER

TEN

Nikolai

I knew what the fuck they had planned as they led me through one of the clubs we'd just opened in Desolation.

I should have told all of them to fuck off. A bachelor party was the last fucking thing I wanted. If I wanted to get plastered I could do that in the comfort of my own place without all the half-naked strippers they no doubt hired for tonight.

But I knew if I'd tried to back out of it would come off as disrespectful. I personally didn't give two fucks who I disrespected, but Dmitry and I were trying to strengthen the Desolation Bratva, not piss more soldiers off.

The very thought of all the naked female flesh awaiting me tonight had my cock shriveling the hell up. And that in itself pissed me off too.

Konstantin and Arseny glanced back at me as we made our way past the main part of the nightclub and into the back hallways that lead to the offices and staff rooms. I refrained from rolling my eyes at how eager and excited they looked. Hell, this is probably going to be the most action they'd gotten in quite a while.

Because if one thing the Desolation Russians did well, it was party. Unlimited amounts of booze, drugs, tits and ass were always in abundance.

Konstantin stopped at a closed door and looked at Arseny, then glanced over his shoulder at me. He faced forward wearing a stupid fucking grin and gave three hard wraps on the door. A second later it was being pulled open.

I wasn’t surprised to see the room filled with Bratva soldiers, high-ranking underworld officials, and females in every shade and shape.

The noise level was growing louder with every passing second, a deafening roar once I stepped inside. Shouts of congratulations filled the room, coupled with slaps on my back.

“*Ah, my friend Nikolai*,” Kirill said, his voice slurred from too much vodka, his Russian barely legitimate for how much he’d had to drink.

I glowered at him at the “friend” reference.

“*You’ll tell us how rough and hard you fuck that Italian bitch, yeah*?” he slurred out and tipped his head back to laugh. “*Come back and tell us how much she bleeds and cries.*”

I snapped. I turned on him and gripped his throat, tightening my hand so hard his face went from red to purple. I pulled him close and inhaled deeply, my nostrils flaring as I took in his wide eyes, his startled expression, and the stench of fear pouring off him.

Good, the bastard had reason to be terrified right now.

“*Say it again,*” I gritted out loud enough only he heard me. Although I realized the commotion in the room had lessened, felt all the gazes locked on me, I didn't care who heard or saw what was about to go down.

“*Go on Kirill. Fucking say those words about my soon-to-be wife once more.*” His eyes widened and he shook his head, his mouth opening and closing as he tried to get out the words.

I squeezed his throat tighter, letting him know that I was the one to control the situation. I was the stronger one. I leaned in another inch until our noses were nearly touching and snarled out in Russian, “*if you ever fucking say anything about her again, I’ll cut out your tongue, grill it up, and feed it to Dmitry’s dog. Do you understand*?” He struggled even more to breathe. “Tell me you understand. Nod your fucking head,” I finished off in English.

He nodded instantly, his face getting a deeper shade of purple, his struggles becoming less. I held his stare for another second before finally loosening my hold enough that he could suck in a deep breath.

“*Yes. Yes I understand. My apologies. I meant no disrespect.*”

I let him go fully, feeling satisfaction when he sank to the ground and started rubbing his neck, gasping and struggling to breathe. Bodies moved away from him, but no one said shit.

A red indentation of my hand already marred his throat, a thick collar that would be a bruise and a reminder tomorrow. I smoothed my hands down my jacket and looked around the room, noticing all the assholes glance away quickly.

“Well, “I said in a bored tone. “If this is a fucking party, then let’s fucking party. “

A few men cleared their throats and shifted on their feet as their clear hesitation poured out of them. I got off on the reputation of being “trigger happy” or having a short fuse, and of breaking fucking bones if anyone offended me. It made others remember to tread careful. To fear me.

But after a few seconds of me not losing my shit again the music was turned up and the voices started to rise again. The stripers, or hell, prostitutes more than likely, started grinding on the men and taking their clothes off. I could hear hands slapping ass cheeks, and saw hands reaching for any and all available female fresh flesh.

I knew before the night was over there would be condoms littering the ground, clothes scattered across couches, and the stench of booze, sweat, and dirty sex filling the air to a nauseating level.

One of the girls sauntered up to me but I gave her a firm shake of my head and she made a U-turn, getting snagged around the waist by one of the other men right away. I scowled as I pushed a few guys out of my way and walked over to where Dmitry sat on a leather chair. He had a glass of whiskey in one hand, and a thick cigar in the other.

When I was in front of him I glowered down at the way he smirked. The bastard thought this shit was funny?

“How are you liking the soiree?”

Fucker.

He knew I wasn’t into this kind of shit, and had no doubt, especially by the cocky look on his face, that he found it hilarious that I was annoyed by this bachelor party.

When I didn’t respond, Dmitry exhaled a cloud of cigar smoke and chuckled. I lowered myself down and sat on the other chair beside him.

Long seconds passed before he said, “never took you for the protective type.” His voice was low, his focus on the crowd.

“She’s an extension of me,” I said flatly.

“Hmm,” he responded and I made a gruff noise in my throat of irritation.

“Insulting her is no different than a motherfucker doing it right to my face, and you know how I deal with a ballsy bastard who does that.”

Dmitry glanced at me, his expression void of emotion aside from a lone eyebrow cocking up. “Okay,” he said but I could hear the amusement in his voice.

I gritted my teeth and narrowed my eyes.

“You think I didn’t notice the way you were staring at her when we were at Bianchi’s house? Or how you wanted to break her father’s hand when he grabbed her?” Dmitry lifted his brow again and brought his cigar to his mouth, taking a few puffs, a thick cloud of smoke trailing out of the corners of his mouth.

I clenched my jaw and looked away, watching as Kirill stood against the bar, a partially naked woman sitting on his lap. He palmed one of her tits, his other hand curled around a bottle of vodka. His neck sported one hell of a handprint, and I felt sadistic pleasure fill me.

“*Don’t act like you wouldn’t have been looking at her the same way*,” I murmured. Lucky for Dmitry, I hadn’t seen him eye-fucking Amara. If I had, I probably would have beat his ass until he was black and blue. “*She’s beautiful*.”

I hadn’t been able to get her off my mind since we left the East Coast, and the very thought of any other female had my dick acting like a turtle afraid and tucking into itself. A pathetic example, but one that was pretty fucking accurate.

Not that I had the time, energy, or hell, even the fucking desire to test out the theory that my cock now thoroughly belonged to Amara, apparently. I just had no appetite for anyone but my pretty young fiancé.

But we’d been neck deep in Bratva shit, cleaning up our father’s hectic and chaotic dealings, the kind of shit that would have had the Desolation branch imploding if it stayed on that path. Although we’d known how crazed our father had been, we hadn’t realized the extent of his lunacy until we’d started going through everything.

“You know I would’ve been all in and followed through with the plan whether Bianchi’s daughter was a hag or gorgeous.”

Dmitry made a deep sound in his throat and I looked over to watch him take a puff off his cigar, one of his fingers from his other hand tapping on the side of his glass as he looked around the room.

“You know I never doubted you or your commitment.” He looked at me then. “I knew you would’ve followed through no matter what. It’s just a plus she’s a hot piece of ass, huh?”

I felt the hand that was curled around the armrest tighten against the leather, my nails digging into the material as annoyance filled me. “Watch it,” I growled.” Dmitry glanced at me and smirked.

Fuck, what was going on with me?

Even hearing my brother talking about Amara that way, pointing out how gorgeous she was, had jealous rage filling me. The bastard liked getting under my skin.

I let my gaze go over to Kirill once more. He was nursing that vodka, every once in while lifting his hand to rub his neck. But he was smart not to look in my direction. I was still fuming from what he said, liable to go off the rails again at the slightest provocation.

“*I have to get out of here*.” I stood and looked over at Dmitry, seeing him already watching me.

“*It’s your party and you’re just gonna up and leave*?” Although my brother questioned me, his tone told me he really didn’t give a shit one way or the other if I was here.

I made a noncommittal sound, and he reached his hand out. I clapped my palm against his, told him I’d talk to him later, and then headed out. I felt my blood boiling, aggression still pumping through my veins after not only hearing Dmitry talk about how hot my fiancé was, but also the shit with Kirill, all the Bratva stress, and the fucking bullshit still eating at me with Amara’s father.

I knew Amara was afraid of Marco. I could see the way she looked at him, the timid demeanor that her mother and sister also held. It was one that had been trained into them out of fear.

And I didn’t want my future wife to be afraid. I needed someone who was as strong as I was, who would stand beside me and watch as I burned the city to the ground and tallied up the bodies that littered our feet.

And I felt–*sensed*–she had that inside of her. I just needed to bring it forth, let her see that even in the darkness you didn’t have to be afraid, not if you ruled it.

I ignored everyone as I headed out of the backroom, took a left after I shut the door behind me, and made my way toward the backdoor that would lead to the alleyway behind the club.

I pushed open the bar on the door, stepped outside, an echoing *bang* echoing off the brick building behind me. The back alley of the club held the dumpsters, along with two damn near burnt out street lights, one in each corner, and a chain-link fence lining the entire length of the building ahead of me.

The trash had gotten picked up earlier this week, but there was still the decaying sweetness of garbage in the air, coupled with motor oil, car exhaust, and a tangy scent that was reminiscent of blood.

I leaned against the building and fished out a cigarette from inside my jacket pocket. I stared down at the white stick, scowling. I really needed to quit these dirty fuckers. But with my stress of an all-time high, my cock only coming to attention for one particular female that I couldn't even touch yet, the only kind of relief I could find was in this little bastard.

I put the cigarette between my lips, fished out my zippo, and flicked the top to light the end. After a long inhale, the tip glowing bright orange, I pocketed the lighter and rested my head against the building, staring up at the city light polluted sky.

I closed my eyes and took another deep drag, and lifted my free hand to scrub it over my jaw, the scruff along my cheek scraping my palm. When I exhaled and opened my eyes, everything around me came rushing back.

I was about to take one last hit before I headed back inside when I heard the sound of something loud hitting one of the dumpsters. My entire body tensed, my muscles clenching. I slowly straightened from the brick wall, letting the cigarette fall from my fingers and snubbing it out with the heel of my boot.

I trained my vision toward where the sound came from, and for several seconds I controlled my breathing and tried to keep myself calm and even. And then I just listened.

I could've brushed it off as the same shit that happened day in and day out in this fucked up city. Murders, assaults, illegal dealings, and all sorts of other degrading, nasty shit. But something kept me rooted to the spot, and when I heard a soft female whimper come from the other side of the dumpster diagonal to where I stood, I felt my hands tighten into fists at my sides.

I already had a plethora of anger rushing through me, built-up energy, increased pent-up aggression from all the shit that I'd been dealing with the last month. And that aggression had only risen in me the longer I let it fester

and boil. I needed an outlet. And when I heard the distinct sound of someone getting hit, I knew I'd found it.

I started making my way toward where the sound came from, and made out more clearly the soft pleas from a woman and gruff demands from a male.

His voice slurred, the sound of his hand hitting no doubt her face growing louder and louder, making my anger rise to the forefront.

All I could picture was Marco treating Amara that way, putting his hands on her brutally, making her obey his rules, his law.

The blood was rushing through my veins, my nails digging into my palms hard enough I knew I broke the skin**.** My chest was pumping up and down, the need to draw blood, to make someone hurt filling me like a violent beast ready to tear out of me, skin me alive just to escape.

For the little sanity I had left, I needed to get this rage out of me. Because if I didn't, it would continue to grow and mutate inside of me. I'd be too dangerous to be around Amara, too volatile. I already wanted her desperately, craved her, hungered and was so fucking thirsty for her.

I was a ticking time bomb and I needed to push the detonation.

She didn't need to see that side of me, the one that got excited and anticipated giving pain and delivering death, violence and blood. But as much as I wanted to give her gentle and sweet like she deserved, I knew that was also false hope. Who did I think I was to be able to offer that to anyone?

I rounded the edge of the dumpster and saw two forms, the shadows concealing most of their features, but I could make out his body, much larger than hers.

I had a gun strapped to me, but that's not how tonight would go. That's not how this fight would end. I'd use my hands, and make it really painful.

I curled my hand in his hair before he knew I was standing behind him, and then with all the force I had, slammed his face into the side of the dumpster.

His skull cracked against the metal and made an echoing sound. The woman cried out and stumbled back. All I could picture was Amara, someone hurting her, someone thinking they could take from her what she wasn't offering.

I started breathing harder, couldn't see straight, couldn't hear anything but the rush of blood in my veins.

He let out a deafening roar when I let go of his hair. I took a step back and watched the woman run off, her clothes haphazard, her hair wild around her head.

I focused back on the piece of shit, his upper body curled forward, his hands covering his face. I was pretty sure I'd broken his nose, could smell the blood that was no doubt pouring from his nostrils

"What the fuck," he slurred and went to stand, bracing a blood covered hand on the metal as he looked at me. I kept to the shadows, and as he blinked at me, not recognizing who I was, I knew he was about to come at me.

Good.

The fucker smelled like a brewery, probably had all sorts of toxic shit shut up in his veins too. His movements would be slow and sloppy.

I let the smile spread across my mouth, slow, thorough. I could see when his vision adjusted to the darkness, when he could see me a little more clearly. He swallowed roughly and took a small step back, but the dumpster was in his way, stopping him from retreating.

There was no escape for him, not with what I planned to do. He'd be a broken, ruined mess at my feet, bloody and destroyed just like he was going to do to that woman. I'd never been a man who cared about other people's business. If it didn't concern me and I kept moving.

But this was different and I couldn't explain it, couldn't stop myself as I took a step forward, grinning bigger as he took a step back. He held up his hands, blood dripping down his palms and along the underside of his forearms.

"Please, please I didn't know it was you. I wasn't going to do anything."

I didn't say anything. Words didn't need to be spoken. That time had passed. In fact, that time had never come. He wanted pain and distraction right now. And so I'd give it to him tenfold

I slammed my fist into the side of his head, his skull slamming against the dumpster once more. He groaned but didn't fight back. I wanted him to. I needed him to. And it pissed me off that he was being submissive because he knew who I was.

I growled low and held his thick, sweaty neck in my grip, squeezing tightly, doing to him what I wanted to do to Kirill back at the club. I used force to walk him backwards so his body slammed against the chain-link,

felt his hands claw at the back of mine, his nails digging at flesh, and all I did was stare into his eyes.

I crushed his trachea in my grasp, listening to the garbled sounds of him trying to breathe. I watched as the blood vessels burst in the whites of his eyes, the muted glow from the streetlight giving me a front row seat to his death.

And how I fucking reveled in it, like flames with accelerant, an addict with his next hit, a lungful of oxygen after not being able to breathe.

I'd never claimed to be a good guy. I was the villain in every story, the boogeyman under beds. I was the grim reaper greedily coming to take that next life.

And I'd never apologize for it. Because I'd never stop. This was me. A monster who wore that title like a fucking crown.

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CHAPTER

ELEVEN

Amara

The wedding

I didn’t know how long we stood there, seconds, minutes… God it felt like an eternity, but then the double doors were being pulled open, a man on each side holding them, their tuxedos pressed and sharp. Their expressions were stoic as they glanced our way.

My father had his hand curled around mine, which rested on his forearm. But I wasn’t foolish enough to think it was because he was trying to reassure me. No, he was doing it so I didn’t run. Not that I would get very far in these stilettos or with all the security.

I closed my eyes and breathed slowly.

The day had finally come. I was about to wed Nikolai, heir to the Desolation Russian mafia. A man who was by all accounts… bad.

And he was to be my husband, for better or worse.

My father’s body was tense beside me, almost forbidding. I chanced a glance at him out of the corner of my eye, my veil making his visage cloudy, hazy in appearance.

He looked over at me for just a second. I could see the softening on his face, or maybe it was wishful thinking, a little girl looking up at her father, hoping and praying that he would tell her everything would be okay.

But that wasn’t who Marco Bianchi was. He was cold and hard like a block of ice, and when I saw his jaw tense, a muscle under the freshly shaved olive toned skin flex, I felt… nothing. No disappointment, no sorrow, only let the absolute hopelessness that nothing would get better fill

me until it’s all that consumed me. I accepted it, dare I even say embraced that this was who and what I was and nothing could change that.

I faced forward again, stared at the large oak double doors. Bodies lined the pews, each one standing up as the traditional wedding song started playing.

My heart was racing overtime when I saw Nikolai’s dark and imposing form at the end of the aisle. He waited for me, waited to take ownership of me.

For better or worse. For better or worse. For better or worse.

It was my father tugging me forward that had me blinking back into the present, breathing out slowly, thankful for the veil, in fact, because it hid how nervous I no doubt looked.

If I hadn’t been holding onto my bouquet with one hand, and gripping my father’s forearm with the other, I knew my fingers would be shaking.

The walk down the aisle seemed to take an eternity. I felt everyone's gazes on me, their stares like a heavy presence, a weight that kept pushing me further down, down, down. And then it was as if someone pressed fast forward.

Everything was a blur as I was handed off by my father to my soon-to-be new husband, as Nikolai led me up the two steps to the altar, as words spoken by the priest. I was aware of the heavyweight of my hand in Nikolai’s, and the only thing I could hear was the heavy rush of my breathing moving through my ears.

In and out. In and out.

And then I felt Nikolai give my hand a squeeze before he positioned me so I was fully facing him now. He stared down at me for long seconds before he lifted my veil. Everything felt surreal, as if I were wading underwater, everything so thick around me I couldn’t find purchase, couldn’t get to the surface. But the longer I stared at Nikolai, the more everything seemed to fall into place. To settle.

Reality crashed into me, noises bombarded me. I smelled the spicy scent of his cologne, and felt his body heat surrounding me.

“I do,” he said low and deep, his Russian accent seeming so thick in those two words.

And when it was my turn I was on autopilot, murmuring those two words as I stared into his blue eyes.

More words were said by the priest, phrases in Latin, followed by traditional religious proceedings that had us going through the motions.

And then it was done. Finalized, sealed by six little words spoken in English.

“You may now kiss your bride.”

The corner of Nikolai’s mouth slowly curled up into a smirk, his hands rested on either side of my face, his thumbs brushing along my cheekbones. “For better or worse, *printsessa*.” A gentle sweep of his thumb against my bottom lip. “You’re mine now, *kukolka*.”

And then he was leaning down, his mouth pressing to mine, his lips surprisingly soft against mine. A little shocked sound left me when I felt his tongue stroking over the seam of my mouth. I gasped then, my first kiss sending electricity traveling to the tips of my fingers and toes.

My eyes fluttered closed when he stroked his tongue along my lips once more, when I heard the low and deep groan rumble out of his throat.

My mouth parted on its own. And when he delved inside, taking that as my surrender, touching his tongue to mine, all I tasted was an addictive male. All I smelled was Nikolai. All I felt was my husband.

And now I was irrevocably his.

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CHAPTER

TWELVE

Amara

"You're going to get drunk, *passerotta*." My mother's voice was hushed, but her tone was tight, as if she were angry that I was drinking my third glass of champagne.

At my own wedding.

And because I was already feeling a buzz, I didn't care to placate her and stop.

The entire day was a blur and the only thing that was helping my nerves was the alcohol. All I could keep thinking about was what was going to happen tonight when the reception was over and Nikolai took me upstairs to our honeymoon suite.

Just the thought had me reaching for the stem of my champagne glass and bringing the flute to my mouth, finishing it off before snagging another one by a passing waiter.

I could feel my mother's scowl, heard her click her tongue disapprovingly at me, but I ignored her. but I didn't look at her. My face felt hot, the alcohol rushing through me but I felt good. I felt like all the stress of the last month was fading. Thankfully.

I let my gaze travel over the expansive ballroom, the massive crystal chandelier that hung in the center of the room casting golden shards of crystalline light across everything and making it seem like it was a fairytale instead of my nightmare.

There were circular tables in perfect intervals around the large square swatch of the polished, wooden dance floor. The bar lined one entire wall,

white up lights illuminating the mirrored wall behind it. And the waitstaff made sure no one ever had an empty glass.

My gaze went to Tommaso and Edoardo, watching as they stood by one of the entrances to the balcony, their posture stiff, their expressions firm. And although they wore tuxedos, blended in with the guests, I knew they probably had a handful of weapons on them.

I kept scanning the bar and as if I were being pulled one way, my gaze landed on my husband. My. Husband.

Nikolai stood with his brother Dmitry, a handful of men that had been their "guests" standing close to them as well. But I knew those men weren't here in a formal way. They were soldiers, just like half the men that had been at the wedding.

As if he heard my thoughts, or felt my gaze, Nikolai looked at me and our gazes locked. My body's reaction to him was instantaneous. Pulse racing, belly feeling like butterflies moved within it, hands starting to shake.

And when his grin was slow to move across his face, when he winked at me and silently promised all the dark and devilish things he'd do to me tonight, my body reacted then too.

I felt my inner muscles clench, tingle. I grew warm between my thighs… wet.

Oh God.

I reached for my nearly filled champagne flute and took a hard pull from it.

Part of me wanted to keep looking at him, especially as I watched his smile grow, as if he knew how off-balance he made me, how nervous I was. How he affects me. But I forced myself to look away and scan the room again, trying in vain to focus on something else.

I couldn't help but think about what Francesca had told me at the dress fitting. I couldn't help but feel my worry that what she said was the truth, that Nikolai was a beast and would do all kinds of debasing, degrading things to me all for his pleasure.

My gaze went back to Nikolai. He still watched me, this hungry look in his eyes.

"It's time." A deep voice said behind me and I looked over my shoulder to see my father standing there, his posture stiff as he all but glared down at me, his hand held out.

I breathed out slowly and stood, gathering the skirting of my dress and slipping my palms in his.

Tradition was important in my family, in any good Italian one where custom and authenticity was held to the highest standard.

And so my father led me to the dance floor, just as an old Sicilian wedding song started playing. My father pulled me in close to dance, a pasted-on smile across his face solely for appearances.

He was silent for several long seconds before he broke the ice with his hard pitch-ax of a demeanor. “You’ll be good for your new husband, won’t you.” It wasn’t phrased like a question. It was a demand.

I nodded.

“Good,” my father said with a final tone. “You’re representing our family. You are the glue to bridge the gap between the Bratva and the Cosa Nostra.” His stare was so cold I felt it to my bones. “Your brother barely meets my expectations. And your sister’s spirit is too high. She’ll be in trouble the older she gets. I’ll be lucky if I can pawn her off to one of my soldiers.”

My worry for Claudia rose but I didn't let it show, didn’t want to give my father anything to use against her, to lock her up even more, suffocate her as he made our home her prison. “She’s sweet and soft and timid,” I found myself saying the words before I could stop them.

He scoffed. “Your sister is trouble. She'll have to learn her lesson. She’ll need to know her place. And she has three years to come to heel before that happens.”

I felt panic rise in me but tried to beat it back. My focus went to where Claudia sat with Gio and our mother. She was picking at a piece of bread, a scowl on her face as our mother said something to her that clearly made her unhappy.

My father pushed me back slightly so I was forced to tip my head to look into his face. And he never stopped dancing, putting on that facade.

“You will obey him.” His voice was hard and firm. “Your husband is the law. You will make this family proud, and you’ll do all that is expected of you. No questions. No complaints. Complete obedience.” His expression was familiar, frigid and cold and more lifeless than I’d ever seen.

He didn’t wait for a response because he didn’t want one. He wasn’t asking a question, wasn’t asking my permission. He was telling me what I would do and that was the end of it.

He rested his palm on my waist, his other hand holding mine as we moved fluidly around the polished dance floor. My heart was thundering and my throat was tight and dry, but still my gaze sought out the man in question.

Nikolai and his brother had since moved away from the bar and stood by the balcony doors. The corner that they stood in held the hazy glow from the chandelier lights, but his focus was trained on me, as if he hadn't taken it off this entire time.

I shivered.

"You do what he says, Amara."

My father's tone brought my attention back to him once more. I knew what he meant.

I licked my lips but didn't respond. I forced myself not to look at Nikolai but that only lasted a few minutes. No matter what position I was in as we danced, Nikolai always had his focus on me.

I could do this, be the devoted wife that my father wanted. But it wasn't because Marco Bianchi ordered me. It would be because of pure survival. I wanted to be happy. I wanted to be loved. I didn't think I'd ever find that with Nikolai, but I wanted to try. Because what other options were there?

The song ended and we were handed off to waiting guests. My father did a slow dance with my mother, and I was swept away by my father's brother, Ignacio. My uncle was nothing like my father. He was jovial, humorous. He was kinder, if you could be kind in the mafia. But that was probably why my father always looked down at Ignacio. He saw him as lesser than because he wasn't an unmoving, coldhearted bastard.

This changing of dance partners happened for the next twenty minutes, with the guests lining up to have their turns.

I was passed off from one family member to the next, one associate to the other. The conversations were polite if not tense, as if no one knew exactly what to say to me.

I danced with Franco, one of my father's associates, and listened to him talk about how his daughter was getting married next spring. When I glanced at my father, I saw him dancing with Francesca.

He looked as pleased with having to dance with everyone as I was. Francesca's mouth kept moving, her smile wide as she kept talking and talking and talking.

I could see my father's jaw clench tightly, no doubt his irritation rising. He wasn't one for conversation. When the song ended he seemed all too grateful to get rid of Francesca as he turned and walked away, leaving her standing there staring at him with a stunned expression on her face.

I envied her then, because that was the look of a daughter who got all the attention she wanted and couldn't understand someone not wanting to hang onto her every word.

After I'd done the obligatory dance with the last guest, I excused myself, wanting to go to the restroom to take a breather, to get away from everyone. I was drowning. But I was waylaid by two of my cousins, both of them chatting happily as if me getting married was the most exciting thing to ever happen.

"Oh my God, look at him," Auna said and her almost dreamy sigh grated on my nerves. She turned her head and made it painfully obvious she was staring at Nikolai. "He's just so big, with all that dark hair and those blue eyes."

She sighed and I felt this twisting sensation in my belly. I didn't want to think too deeply on it. I didn't want to allow myself to think that it was jealousy I felt.

"He looks so… *dangerous*," Selena whispered that last word almost secretly. "Ra more than any of the guys we see around here." She leaned closer to me, her eyes wide. "When I found out you were marrying him I did a little research."

She lifted her hands and wiggled her fingers in front of me as if she were a spy and found out the most interesting evidence. I didn't bother telling her I'd done my own research, as well.

I also wasn't about to admit that yes, Nikolai was so big, so attractive that my body felt like it was short circuiting whenever I thought about him, that I felt arousal I'd never experienced before.

That I feared and anticipated in equal parts what would happen tonight.

I noticed my father dancing with my mother, both of their postures stiff and clearly uncomfortable. I couldn't find Nikolai, but Dmitry and the other Russians stood around a table drinking and laughing, and I could see the way their gazes scanned the room, as if they were waiting for something to happen, hoping they could cause mayhem if it did.

Tommaso was across from where my mother and father danced. I couldn't find Edoardo, but I was thankful for that. I was tired of him being

my second shadow.

I blinked back to the present and looked at Auna and Selena, who were still thoroughly involved in their conversation about my husband.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I murmured and started heading toward the main ballroom doors without waiting for their reply.

I suddenly had crushing pressure on my chest and picked up my pace.

I smiled and nodded as people tried to stop me, congratulated me and wished me well. I expected Nikolai or my father to try and stop me, to usher me back to the oppressing suffocation of being surrounded by all these people.

But no one stopped me. No one tried. And the closer I got to the double doors that led to the hotel hallway, the more that pressure kept growing. I felt hot, beads of perspiration dotting my temples.

When I finally made it through the open double doors and away from the sound and lights, the noise, I took a deep breath in and felt that dizziness that was circulating around me fade

I was walking down the hall and rounding the corner before I realized I made the trek, but I didn’t stop. My feet went over the plush carpet silently, my fingers tight around the lace of my dress. And when I rounded another corner that’s when I stopped and leaned back against the wall. I rested my head back and closed my eyes.

Just breathing.

The sounds of the wedding had faded so I barely heard anything, just the steady beat of my heart, the rush of blood through my veins as it filled my ears. And it stayed like that for several long minutes until a feminine sigh, a little moan broke my contentment.

I blinked my eyes open and lifted my head to look down the hallway where the noise had come from. Then I heard it again, that female sound that was clearly from pleasure. It was followed by a gruff male grunt. Then matching harsh breathing.

I was moving toward it before I knew what was happening. The door I stopped in front of was partially open, just a sliver of a crack allowing me to see into the darkened room. The window off to the side allowed blue-hued moonlight to filter in and show me to bodies pressed against a large couch.

“Are you going to give it to me all?”

I felt my heart race. I knew that voice.

“Come on. Just pull that dress up and let me.”

Edoardo.

This felt wrong, and not just because I was watching something very private.

“Oh Edoardo. I love you.”

I slapped a hand over my mouth to still the sound of my shocked gasp when I heard Francesca.

“I want you,” she whispered. There was the sound of clothes ruffling, a zipper being pulled down, and then Edoardo grunted, Faces gasped, and I took a step back.

“That’s it. Yeah, that’s it.”

And then the very distinct sound of them having sex filled my ears.

“I love you Edoardo. God I love you.”

I stumbled back, my heel getting caught on the end of my dress. My arms flung out as I tried to right myself, my back hitting the wall loud enough all sounds ceased. I should have hurried away but I was frozen in place when I heard hushed, frantic whispers.

And then the door was opening and Edoardo was coming out, gun in hand, eyes frantic and crazed. His gaze locked on me and his eyes seemed to darken before his eyebrows pulled down in a scowl.

“Go back to the party.”

I knew he wasn’t speaking to me even though his focus was trained on my face. A moment later Francesca was slipping past him, her body freezing as she caught sight of me, her eyes widening.

“Amara,” she said softly, this frantic look on her face as she looked between myself and Edoardo. She took a step toward me. “It’s not what you think. You can’t tell–”

“I said go back to the fucking party,” Edoardo snapped out and looked at Francesca with a deep scowl on his face.

I could see the way her throat moved as she swallowed, could practically feel her fear pouring off of her. This wasn’t just her hesitation and being afraid that I would tell anyone that her and Edoardo were having sex, something totally forbidden, a treasure you only gave your husband.

If this came out it would ruin her, destroy her family and their reputation. They’d be shunned, looked down upon, and all because of this one act. And it didn’t matter if she told me she’d been with anyone like she had all but implied at the dress fitting--like she’d all but bragged about it.

Words were just that… words. Easily hidden. But this. This couldn't be hidden or brushed away if someone other than me found out. There were those who would love nothing more than to disgrace a family, to hurt someone above them.

But despite all of that she didn’t fear that, not right now. What she was afraid of right now had everything to do with the absolute brutal expression on Edoardo’s face that was trained right on her. It was one I’d never seen him wear before. He’d always been so stoic, almost seemed so unaffected.

But this… this was the same dangerous man that I saw when I looked into my father’s face. They were cut from the same cloth. They all were.

When she didn’t move fast enough, Edoardo faced her and took a step forward. That had her gripping the skirting of her dress and turning, hustling down the hallway with only one last glance over her shoulder at me before she rounded the corner and then it was just Edoardo and myself alone.

He slowly turned back and faced me and I couldn’t breathe, the air being sucked out from all around me, the suffocating feeling of his anger aimed full force on me.

“I–I didn’t see anything.” I didn't know why I’d said those words . He and I knew the truth, knew what I’d witnessed. It was clearly written across my face.

“Let’s not make a liar out of you, Amara.” He took a step forward but I had nowhere to go.

With a wall at my right, and Edoardo blocking my left and in front of me I was trapped.

I licked my lips. I could scream, call for help. But the tightening of his jaw, and the thinning of his lips told me he knew where my thoughts were going. He lifted his finger and placed it on his mouth.

“Shhh. We don't want anyone to hear a commotion.”

Telling anyone what I saw wouldn’t have hurt anyone but Francesca and her family. I may not have thought very highly of Francesca, but her mother and father had always been kind to me. But he wouldn’t believe me even if I told him so I kept my mouth shut.

Another step forward and I held my breath, not sure what he planned. Threats were obviously on the horizon, but I didn’t like the way he looked at me, like he planned on doing things to me to ensure I stayed quiet.

Like he wanted me to break my word and tell everyone what I'd seen so he could make it a reality.

It was this darkness that spread out from him. It was the way he raked his gaze up and down my body with degrading intent.

"I'm not going to say anything," I said again and tipped my chin up in almost defiance. "I'd never want to hurt Maria's family that way." He smirked, as if what he thought I said was funny. "Let's just go back to the reception. I'm sure Nikolai is waiting for me." I wasn't ashamed to throw my husband's name out there, hoping it would put fear into Edoardo. But all he did was take a step closer. His gaze roamed across my face and I curled my fingers into my palms, my nails biting into the flesh, the pain sparking into pleasure.

"Here's what's going to happen, Amara," he said in a low voice as he reached up and rubbed a strand of my hair between his thumb and forefinger, his focus trained on the act. "You're going to stay quiet because I'm not going to lose my station. I'm not going to be punished by your fucking father because I broke the rules. And you're going to keep that pretty mouth shut or I'm going to do all kinds of things that you're not going to like." He slowly lifted his gaze from that lock of hair to meet my gaze. "But it's definitely going to be things I like," he whispered.

A long pause of silence stretched between us, as if he wanted to let those words sink in, let that meaning really solidify.

"Do you understand what I mean, Amara?" I wanted to slap him, to scream in his face, to tell him he couldn't speak to me like that. I was above him, not just in morals and dignity, not just in respect or status, but because he was the lowest of the low. He was a killer, willing to force me to do what he wanted simply to keep my mouth shut.

Oh I understood. But clearly he *didn't*. "What do you think will happen when I tell them the truth? What do you think they'll do to you when I tell my husband that you threatened me?"

Edoardo's eyes darkened even further and he tightened his fingers on that strand of hair until it was being pulled, a sting to my scalp that had me gritting my teeth.

"Fuck the Bratva," he spit out. "Your father is a weak man for making deals with those lowlifes." Edoardo lifted that lock of hair up to his nose and inhaled deeply, this disgusting sound of pleasure leaving his throat.

Motion in my peripheral had me glancing to the side.

Time seemed to stand still as I watched Nikolai round the corner and slowly walk down the hallway, his focus on me, so intent, so deadly. He lifted a hand and I watched with what felt like huge eyes as he slipped his hand inside his tuxedo jacket. I could hear Edoardo talking, his voice a distorted rumble that I couldn't process anything else.

I heard this buzzing in my ear, drowning out everything else, making it impossible to know what he said. But I could feel him tugging on the strand of my hair, and I took my focus off of my husband for a second to see Edoardo grin at me lasciviously as he leaned in, his gaze now on my mouth.

"You're going to listen to me and keep your mouth shut or I'm going to fuck you so hard you bleed for days afterward. Do you understand me?"

My skin prickled, tingled as I looked back at Nikolai, my eyes widening even more, my mouth slightly parted. He pulled out a gun, the silver metal catching the light.

"Or maybe you want me to do that. If you're married to Russian scum, you probably like it rough and raw, don't you?"

Edoardo was too absorbed in his disgusting plans for me that he didn't even sense the monster who stood right beside him.

It was only when Nikolai lifted the gun and trained it at Edoardo's temple that I felt the air around me change. And it took a millisecond for Edoardo to realize we weren't alone. But it was too late.

Because when Nikolai gave me a slow grin and an arrogant wink, I knew this was the end.

And then my husband pulled the trigger.

I didn't hear the gunshot but I felt the blood, the hot spray of it along my neck and throat, no doubt covering my pristine white dress. I felt the vibration of Edoardo's body hitting the floor between Nikolai and I, but still I couldn't take my eyes off my husband's bright blue eyes.

He'd brought death with him, and now he was bringing me down to hell to rule beside him.

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CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

Amara

I felt my hearing slowly return, my body jerked back to reality. I felt pin pricks move along my arms and legs as the rush of blood increased under my skin. It was painful. I welcomed it. I inhaled, the oxygen feeling cold, icy in my lungs as the world crashed back into me.

I remembered bits and pieces of the reception, tears in my memory of the gun, of the bullet cracking through Edoardo's skull. I saw flashes of images and sounds, the very real sensation of that warm spray of blood covering my neck and chest, my arms and all over my dress.

And as I stood here in the hotel room where I'd spend my wedding night, where Nikolai would pluck my virginity and lock it away as his and his alone, I knew with the cold hard truth of reality that I would forever be changed.

I closed my eyes as I thought back to the last few minutes after Edoardo was killed. I remembered staring at Nikolai looking into my eyes, the dead body of Edoardo between us, blood sprayed lightly across Nikolai's neck. He'd said nothing, didn't move, just breathed slowly, deeply, as if he hadn't just put a bullet in my guard's head for touching my hair. And that's all he would have seen. He wouldn't have known the disgusting things Edoardo said, what he planned. He didn't know what I'd seen happen with Francesca.

Nikolai had killed someone for me for simply being too close, for touching a lock of my hair.

I vaguely remembered Francesca screaming at the end of the hall. Her mouth had been wide, her face red, and tears streamed down her face as she stared down at Edoardo's body.

I remembered Nikolai wrapping his hand around my waist and pulling me close to his side, leading me down the hall and out of the reception hall. And when my father blocked our way, his face red as he stared at his now dead soldier, I vaguely recalled Nikolai telling my father we were leaving because he wanted to be alone with "his pretty new wife", and that Marco "needed to clean up the mess".

My father cursed under his breath in Italian, and then snapped his fingers for his men to do damage control and make sure the hotel staff didn't come around until they got Edoardo out of there and the blood cleaned up.

But by then I was already half-way down the hallway-way, the heavy weight of his palm on the small of my back giving me a strange sort of comfort and stability. And what I recalled with clarity was that Nikolai hadn't been in a rush. He hadn't cared that he left a corpse in the hallway of a very busy and prestigious hotel.

I blinked back into focus and took in my surroundings. How long had we been in the hotel room? I didn't remember anything after leaving my father and his men, and didn't remember the elevator ride up or stepping inside the room.

Yet here I was.

"Come, Amara," Nikolai said in a deep voice and I blinked several times, seeing him standing in the darkened hallway, the shadows concealing his visage so all I could make out was his huge body.

And then I was moving toward him, following him, my feet padding over the plush runner making my steps silent. I was swallowed by the shadows, my need and desires and all the emotions I felt waging war in me.

HE WAS ALREADY WAITING for me in the grand bedroom, standing a few feet from me, the hue of the city lights making his massive body almost glow, yet concealing the entire front of him so I couldn't see his expression.

Nikolai walked up to me, and I felt my heart jerk in my chest when he stopped a foot from where I stood. The scent of him had the air slowly leaving my lungs as if he alone had the power to make me breathless.

And when he lifted a hand all I could think about was that first time he'd touched me at my father's home, the forbidden stroke of his fingers on my body that lit me up from the inside out. But he didn't touch me, and instead reached over my shoulder and slowly closed the door, the soft *click* deafening in the grand hotel master suite because it meant finality.

And then he was gone, moving several feet back as if he knew being so close to me made it hard to function, to think… to even breathe.

I couldn't breathe, couldn't even move as I watched Nikolai stare at me.

It seemed like an eternity passed where we just stood there, the pressure in the room growing until almost felt unbearable, like all he wanted to do was make me as uncomfortable and unsteady as possible.

He reached down and unclasped the heavy-metal of his watch before walking silently over to the polished dresser and setting it on top. He turned and faced me once more and shrugged out of his tuxedo jacket, tossing it to the bed without looking to see if it landed where it was meant for. His vest was to follow. His fingers found his bowtie, undoing it in steady, unhurried motions. When he was just in his crisp white shirt he held still for long seconds.

THEN HE WENT for the top of his shirt, undoing the buttons one by one, going all the way down until he let the material move off those broad, wide shoulders and fall to the ground.

Nikolai still said nothing, and I let my focus trail over his broad shoulders, along his muscular arms, and over his defined, powerfully masculine chest. He was so big, so strong that I couldn't breathe, felt a lighted fire start in me that scared the hell out of me.

He had tattoos covering a lot of his skin, dark and angry designs, skulls and detailed knives and guns, Russian symbols and words that made him seem even more dangerous.

Nikolai hummed in what was obvious approval and I snapped my gaze back to his face. His eyes were hooded as he smirked.

"Does my pretty young wife like the way her husband looks?"

When I felt my eyes widen and didn't respond, he chuckled deeply… darkly.

My wedding night was here, upon me, and I was covered in blood, my white dress splattered in red pinpoints, my face and neck feeling tight,

sticky for the silence my husband exacted on Edoardo.

He went for his belt and undid the buckle, pulling it loose so the two halves of leather hung open, and then went for the button of his black slacks. When he chuckled again, I looked back at his face, realizing I'd lost focus as I watched him undress.

"Yeah, my gorgeous little wife likes what she sees." He hummed but didn't undo his pants, just kept his fingers on the button. "I can't wait to show you all the other things you'll enjoy." He took a step closer but I was frozen in place, my eyes still wide, my throat tight. He moved another step closer.

I held my breath as I tipped my head back so I could look into his face. The lights were off in the hotel room, the moonlight and glow from the city lights and skyscrapers right outside the large window across from us bathed him in this ominous glow.

My body tensed when he lifted his hand and I felt him drag the pad of his thumb over my jawline and down my neck. He pulled his hand away and stared at the digit for a second before shifting his hand in my direction so I could see the dark, rust-colored smear on his skin.

"Amara," he murmured my name deeply, his gaze going down to my mouth, then to my neck… and lower still until he got his gaze lingering on my chest. He hummed again. "I've never seen anything more beautiful than the sight of you covered in gore and not sure what's going to happen next." He made a lewd show of dragging his gaze from my breasts to my face.

His expression was stone-cold as he held my focus and brought his thumb to his mouth, sucking it off. I gasped, shocked at what he'd just done. And before I could react he had his hand wrapped around my throat, walked me backward so the wall stopped our movements.

He added slight pressure and lifted up slightly, causing me to rise on my toes to keep the pressure off my neck so I could breathe. Nikolai leaned in so our noses barely touched, so our lips were almost brushing. We shared the same breath for long seconds.

"Mmm." The vibrations from his deep voice speared right between my thighs. "I'm going to have so much fun with you, wife."

And then he was dragging his tongue along my lips. It wasn't a kiss, it wasn't soft or sweet or gentle. It was obscene, like a lion licking at his prey, marking his territory.

His body heat caused beads of sweat to form along the length of my spine and between my breasts

And then he was gone a second later, taking several steps back so I was forced to brace my palms flat on the wall behind me to steady myself.

“As much as I get hard seeing you covered in the blood of someone I killed…” He tipped his chin toward the open doorway to the bathroom. “I’m sure you’d feel more comfortable getting cleaned for your wedding night.”

And then he turned and left the bedroom, walking out of the room. I was frozen for long moments until I heard the sound of ice being dropped into a glass in the sitting room. I closed my eyes and sucked in a ragged breath.

When I opened them I was staring at the arch ceiling, the chandelier in the room elaborate and obnoxiously luxurious. I lifted my hand, realizing it slightly shook, and touched my bottom lip, still feeling it wet from his saliva, warm from his tongue. And then I shocked myself by running my tongue along my bottom lip, tasting the flavor of Nikolai mixed with the coppery flavor of blood from the man he killed.

I pushed away from the wall and walked on unsteady feet to the bathroom, shutting the door and locking it. Not that a lock would keep a man like Nikolai Petrov away. If he wanted in I knew he’d find a way.

He’d always find a way.

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CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

Amara

I’d been in the bathroom too long, so long the water had run cold and still I stayed in the stall. So long the ends of my hair had dried and curled against my back, the strands making my flesh feel even more sensitive.

I’d expected Nikolai to pound on the door, to demand I come out and give him what was now rightfully his.

But he never came, never rushed me.

And I could breathe, gather myself, and clear my head. Or at least I could until I faced him. Which I had to do sooner or later so I might as well get it over with.

I closed my eyes and breathed out once. Twice. Three times. I opened my eyes and stared at my reflection before straightening and making sure my towel was on securely in place. I’d been too flustered to grab a change of clothes from the overnight bag that had been packed before leaving my home. *My home.* Not any longer.

My hands shook and I hated it, hated that I didn't have control. Whatever had been shoved into that bag was all I’d take with me. Nothing from my “old life” would come with me. I’d have nothing physical to hold memories of whatever happiness I’d managed to scrape up living under my father’s rule.

I shook my head to push myself back to the present. Here I was, about to step out into the master suite with nothing but a thigh-length terry cloth covering my nudity. My virginity.

With one more look at my reflection, I turned towards the door, reached out with a shaky hand, and gripped the handle. I opened it just as I reached up and turned off the light, plunging the small room in darkness, feeling like it would protect me somehow.

It was a ludicrous thought. I had a feeling Nikolai thrived in the shadows.

I stood there for a moment, half in the bathroom and half out, looking into the suite, not seeing or hearing anything. It was wishful thinking that possibly Nikolai wasn't going to accost me tonight.

But he hadn't hurt me, hadn't so much as touched me inappropriately. Not really. He could've pushed me up against the wall and taken me as soon as we got into the hotel room. He could've had me twenty different ways already. But he told me to clean up, giving me time and space.

He'd killed for me. To protect me.

My vision adjusted to the darkness and I looked at the bed, the massive, king size mattress and frame although large, barely filled the huge room. I continued to look around the room, at the seating area across from the bed, the plush couch, the loveseat, and the chaise across from that, the small glass and chrome coffee table between them.

I looked out the window and could see the skyscrapers, the twinkling lights and could imagine how noisy it was. But being this high up, surrounded by metal and glass, concrete and steel, I heard nothing but the steady beat of my heart and my uneven respirations.

But I wasn't alone. I knew that. I *felt* it. And then my gaze found him.

He sat in the corner in the modern style tufted black leather library chair, a swatch of light from the window spilling through.

My heart was racing as I stared at him and watched as he brought his hand up and to his mouth, putting a cigarette to his lips in the sexiest way I could have ever imagined. Although his chest was still bare of any coverings, he still wore his black tuxedo slacks. His feet were bare, and god, how could a man's feet be considered attractive?

He inhaled and the end lit up a bright orange for a second.

I didn't bother telling him it was probably forbidden to smoke in here. He wouldn't care. Nikolai wasn't the type of man to follow the rules. He did what he wanted when he wanted. He didn't care about repercussions. He didn't care about getting in trouble. In fact, I was pretty sure he got a rush going against the grain.

And then a second later a warm glow filled the room and I realized he turned on the small lamp that sat on the table beside the chair he was in. It was just a tiny reading lamp, the light barely spreading out five feet from where he sat, low enough that it gave it an intimate atmosphere.

It gave Nikolai a devilish glow.

But God, it was bright enough that he would be able to see everything, my nudity on full display like a painting in a museum.

He leaned back on the leather chair, one hand resting on the armrest, his back fully against the cushion now. He had an elbow on the opposite armrest, his thighs slightly parted, his body so big that he dwarfed the seat. With his elbow still resting on the edge of the chair, he brought his hand to his mouth. That's when I noticed a cigarette—no, not a cigarette but something else—between his fingers.

He brought it to his lips and inhaled deeply, his eyes narrowing slightly as he stared at me. Nikolai took a long drag from the end, held the smoke in for several seconds, and then exhaled slowly, a cloud of whiteness slightly obscuring his visage.

I knew what he smoked, remembered smelling the same cloying scent years ago when I'd caught Gio sneaking out the back with one of his friends to smoke a joint.

Nikolai was getting high.

I realized this was the first time I really had taken note of his tattoos, of how much of his flesh he had covered in them. On the back of one hand he had a detailed rose inked, and on the other he wore a vicious looking skull. The dark ink crept up as forearms, weaving around his biceps, over his shoulders, and stopped right below his thickly corded neck.

And then there was his chest, that despite all the tattoos and designs, couldn't hide the raw power of his abdomen, couldn't conceal the rippling muscles, the rolling hills of power.

I felt like we were at a standstill, a crossroads as I stood on the opposite end of the room, both of us just staring at each other, my hand having a death grip on the edge of the towel to keep it in place.

And then I saw his gaze travel from my face to my neck, along my collarbones, and over the slight swells of my breasts that I knew he could see underneath the fabric of the towel. He went lower still, a slow and easy appraisal of my form as if he could see right through the material to my

naked body. I shivered, goosebumps popping out along my arms and legs, my breath stalling as I continued to watch him.

He brought the joint to his lips again and took another long inhale from it, his gaze now back on my face.

There was a small decorated tray on the table beside him, which he used to snub the end of the joint.

“Come here *kukolka*.” His voice was deep and dark and barely audible. I found myself unable to move even though this wicked part of me wanted to. Wanted to obey.

When I stood in the same spot one of his dark eyebrows cocked up slightly and the corner of his mouth lifted. He smoothed his left hand over his thigh once. Twice. And on the third time he patted his leg.

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CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

Amara

"Be a good girl and come here and sit on my lap."

Oh God. Why did that sound so… dirty?

The air left my lungs so violently I felt dizzy from it. That demand, that softly spoken order made me feel things I'd never experienced before.

I was embarrassingly wet between my thighs and clenched my legs together, the pressure making it worse, making my arousal grow.

But I did find myself moving closer, doing what he said.

I was only a foot from him when I found myself holding my breath, unable to move closer. He was like a flame and I was liable to get burned.

He laughed low and deep, a chuckle that speared right to my pussy. I licked my lips, not sure what to say, but before a word could escape, he snapped his hand out and curled it roughly around my waist.

I gasped at the force in which he curled his fingers into my waist, a startled sound leaving me when he pulled me forward so quickly I lost my balance. But his firm hold steadied me, and when Nikolai positioned me in the way he wanted, I was left sitting on his lap with my legs thrown over the arm of the chair and the towel riding up my thighs almost indecently.

He started playing with a strand of my hair and I watched with wide eyes as he brought the lock to his nose and inhaled deeply, his eyes becoming hooded.

"Mmm," he hummed and I felt that sound between my thighs. "Normally I'd have to show you how much it disappoints me that you

didn’t listen to me right away.” He ran the tip of that lock of hair over his mouth, slow and easy, lazily almost. “But you’re so innocent, so breakable.”

He let that strand of hair fall to my shoulder as he leaned back in the chair, the leather making a soft sound as his weight settled into it. “So untouched,” he murmured and made another deep rumbling sound from his throat. My chest was rising and falling as fast as I was breathing, but I couldn’t take my gaze away from his face.

It was only when I felt the heavy weight of his palm landing on one of my thighs that I snapped my head in that direction, looking at my lap.

His hand slowly started stroking up and down the top of my thigh, his fingers skating slowly along the bare skin until goosebumps covered my limbs. I couldn’t breathe. Or maybe I was breathing too hard. Too fast. Maybe I was tethered to the world because of him. Or maybe I was floating away.

I couldn't tell reality from fantasy. Or maybe this was a nightmare.

“Tell me,” he said softly, conversationally. “I know you’re a virgin.” That last word was spoken tightly.

It should have disgusted me that he was saying these things, forcing me to reveal anything private about myself. Yet why did it arouse me that he was pushing, that he wanted to pluck any secret I had buried deep in my soul?

“Tell me, little doll, tell me if anyone has ever touched you.” As he stared into my eyes, he slowly pulled one edge of the towel aside until I felt the chilled air in the room brush along my exposed flesh. I automatically tensed, my hands moving down to put the material back in its place. He slapped my inner thigh again.

“Now, now, sweet girl. Don’t try hiding from me. Let me see all that perfection. Let me see what is mine.”

Oh God I was flailing and flailing and flailing down a dark hole and there was no light. No, that wasn't right. There was a light and it was Nikolai. He was the glow as bright as the sun and I was looking right into him.

“Any secret meetings with those teenage bastards?” I made a panicked sound in my throat as he kept touching me. “Hmm, is that a yes? A no?” He innocently stroked me as he forced me to stare into his eyes. “Any little fuckers touching all this perfect skin?” He trailed the tips of his fingers

down to my knee, then curled them inward and started trailing them up my inner thigh. “Who do I need to kill for touching what’s mine?”

I licked my lips, my mouth suddenly so dry, my tongue too thick for me to form any words. He made another deep sound a second later and slapped my inner thigh. Not hard enough to really hurt, but enough that I felt a brief sting from the contact.

“You’ve been such a good girl so far. Don’t start disappointing me now by not obeying.”

I’d never been around a man like him before, his needs very specific. I couldn’t deny that the very thought of obeying him turned me on almost violently.

I felt his hand leave my thigh and I knew he’d slap my tender skin again. I knew I’d get wetter. “N—no,” I finally answered his questions.

“Mmm. So no one has touched this little cunt? No one has ran a finger right down your center?” My face was on fire. “What about yourself, *krasavitsa*? Have you played with this little clit?”

He emphasized his question by doing the act, by circling that bundle until I whimpered.

“When you’re alone in your room and have the darkness as protection to keep your secrets, do you slip your hand between your legs and play with this pretty little cunt?”

I felt my embarrassment rise so strongly I was sweating. Why was he doing this? Why was he being so crude?

Yet I was… wetter.

“I–I’ve never touched myself.” I didn't admit that I’d thought about it, envisioned doing it as I thought of *him*.

I felt his body tense. “So innocent,” he murmured. His finger moved along my cheek. “Look at this blush. Look at how wet you’ve gotten for me? I think my pretty girl likes it when she’s humiliated, don’t you?”

I couldn’t speak. Did he actually expect me to?

“Yeah, I think my *krasavitsa*–my beauty–likes it when I make it hurt because it feels so fucking good, *doesn’t it*?” He growled those last two words. “Hmm,” he kept stroking between my legs, so close to my opening that I anticipated and feared what he’d do. “I own this.” His words were lazy, as lazy as his touch when he covered my pussy. Nikolai leaned in closer so his mouth was right by my ear. “I’ll do what I want with it.” He

added more pressure and I made a mewling noise. “I’ll do whatever I fucking want whenever I want with it, and you’ll ask for more.”

Why did it feel so wrong to hear him say such obscene things to me, to see me as an object, something he owned? Why did it make my body tense and my mind send out a warning signal?

Why do I want him to do it again and again and again?

I shifted on his lap, just the smallest of movements, but I felt how hard he was, the huge length of his erection digging into my bottom. He leaned in closer so his lips were brushing the shell of my ear, his fingers stroking me slowly, slipping through my folds.

He said something under his breath, no doubt feeling how wet I was, the slickness of my arousal coating his fingers.

“Do you feel how hard I am?” His words were nothing but a growl and I felt that vibration all the way down my body, to the very core and soul that made up… me.

My eyes closed on their own and I started breathing harder, not able to answer him. But I knew he didn’t want a response. This was just another way for him to put me on edge, to embarrass me with my inexperience. Because it turned us both on.

“I’ve never been so hard in my life, knowing that no other man has touched you, that my fingers are the first and only ones to ever feel all this honey.” He took a thick finger and circled my opening, not penetrating me, just teasing the edge and drawing out more slickness from me. “*Jesus Christ,*” he snarled and then said a string of words in Russian, ones that sounded coarse and hardened. “To know that my cock is going to be the first… the *only one* to ever feel how tight you are, to ever feel how wet you get…”

He didn’t finish the sentence, just gently pushed the tip of his finger into my pussy. Although it didn’t hurt, his finger was large, wide and thick and filled me. The pressure was intense, the fullness enough to have my inner muscles clamping down.

He made a gruff sound and pulled his finger out, circling my entrance once more. “Fuck, you’re so tight, I can envision how it’s going to feel pushing past all that resistance, popping that little cherry of yours.”

His words were so crude, unlike anything I’d ever heard before. Yet they pulled a moan from me, had my nipples tight, aching. Painful. It was then I realized the towel had come undone, the loose knot that I had secured

around my chest now open so the material was pooled at my waist. I made a surprised sound and was about to reach for it to cover my chest once more when he made a disapproving sound so that I stilled.

He pulled back and I knew he was looking at my chest, could feel his gaze on my breasts so profoundly I felt my nipples tighten even further.

“No, no. You’re going to leave that right where it’s at. You’re going to let me look at these perfect little tits shake as I a finger fuck you and make you cum on my lap. And you’re going to blush like hell for me, your cunt getting all juicy because it embarrasses you knowing the position you’re in for my enjoyment. Isn’t that right?”

A strangled noise left me, one of embarrassment and pleasure.

“I bet you’ve never heard such filth.” That thick, tattooed finger stroked down my cleft. “I bet I’m scandalizing my pretty new virgin wife”

I bit my bottom lip, my teeth pulling at the flesh hard enough I felt a flash of pain and the flavor of copper coat my tongue.

Nikolai had the fingers from his hand that wasn’t buried between my thighs gripping my chin a second later, turning my head in his direction.

“Look at all this perfection, all this unblemished, perfect fucking flesh,” he murmured. “My girl is so pure. But I’ll change that real fucking quick.” And before I knew what he was doing he was dragging his tongue over my bottom lip and groaning. “So sweet, *kukolka*. That’s what you are, my little doll to do with as I please.”

I was scandalized, humiliated, so turned on I couldn’t breathe. Nikolai had done things to me in a matter of one day that I’d never experienced firsthand, that I never could have envisioned.

“How much do I frighten you, Amara?”

The way he said my name, the way his accent was thicker on that lone word, had my inner muscles clenching painfully. Another drag of his tongue over my bottom lip and then he was pushing it into my mouth.

“You don’t,” I said and I couldn’t believe the words spilled from my mouth. Of course there was a part of me that knew I should fear him, but I also knew he wouldn’t hurt me. I didn’t know how, didn’t know why those thoughts reassured me, but I knew that to be the truth.

He pulled back just an inch, our faces so close that I didn’t even think a sheet of paper could pass between us. Nikolai stared into my eyes, his free hand sliding up to wrap around my throat, his fingers tightening ever so

slowly so that I felt the breath start to leave me as my heart beat a static rhythm.

“And now? Do you fear me now, little doll?” He didn’t add any more pressure. He wasn’t going to hurt me. He was testing me, testing the waters of whatever this was between us.

That's what I told myself anyway.

But I said nothing, and instead leaned into his hold, bringing our noses close enough they touched. His eyes became hooded, his nostrils flaring. All I smelled was that addicting, spicy scent of him. It filled my head, made me drunk, as high as Nikolai surely was after smoking that joint, that sweet scent saturating the room.

And still he kept stroking my pussy slowly, almost sweetly, as if he were trying to be gentle for me.

But I needed more. I didn’t know what that *more* was, but I felt it claim me, wrapping it’s tight fist around my body and holding me where I needed to be. And I knew Nikolai could give it to me. He was the only one who could.

A keening cry left me when he pushed one finger into my unused body. He tightened his fingers on my throat marginally, making me stay right where I was, making me take what he gave me.

“You’ll take it, won’t you?” He didn’t phrase it like a question. “You’ll take every single fucking thing I have to give you and you’ll only take it from me.”

My body jerked when he pushed another finger into me. Two digits stretching me, filling my pussy, making it hurt to the point I felt this spark of fire and life and all things clear and right explode inside of me.

My back arched on its own, my breasts thrusting out. He growled and used the hand on my throat, that collar of power and flesh and security, to push me backward so my upper body was bowed even more, my chest in the air, my nipples hard peaks.

He lowered his head and took one of those tips into his mouth, growling again so I felt the vibrations fill me. He shoved those two fingers even deeper inside of me, taking a part of me I didn’t know I had to give. But Nikolai now owned it.

A sound akin to a wounded animal spilled from my parted lips when he bit down on my nipple at the same time he pulled his fingers almost all the way out and then thrust them back into me and curled them inward.

It hurt. It was agony. It was the greatest thing I'd ever felt.

He rubbed his thumb along my clit in slow circles and I reached out to grip his forearm, not to push him away, but to keep him in place. I dug my nails into his flesh and he hissed then groaned.

I couldn't comprehend anything around me as the pleasure and pain and agony and ecstasy filled me and exploded outward.

And the entire time Nikolai sucked at my breast, the ache of his teeth pulling on that tight flesh, the uncomfortable fullness of his fingers lodged in my pussy, drawing out a hurtful pain that sucked the air from my lungs.

He said hushed words against my breasts, words I couldn't hear, but knew I wouldn't understand even if he'd said them loud enough.

And when the pleasure receded my body tingled, every single inch of exposed flesh feeling like I'd touched a live wire.

It was long seconds of riding this wave before I felt myself come back down. I felt him pull his fingers out. I was blinking rapidly, trying to stay conscious when all I wanted to do was float away.

"Look at me, *printsessa*." There was clear command in his voice, a dominant demand that had my attention being pulled to him. He held his hand between us, his middle and index finger covered in my orgasm, streaked in my blood.

My mouth slightly parted as I watched him move those digits to his mouth, drag his tongue over them, licking every drop of *me* off, never once taking his gaze from my eyes. And only when he was done getting his fill did he reach out and grip my chin with that same hand, his fingers wet, a combination of me and him, warm but now cooling against my jaw.

He jerked me forward and our lips slammed together viciously, violently. He plunged his tongue into my mouth and forced me to taste myself, forced me to taste him. He was showing me, making me feel and see and hear and experience that I was now his. And he said all of that with that one kiss.

A new life bloomed in me, light and heat and electricity and so much intensity that I couldn't see anything right in front of me, didn't know where I was. Up or down. Kept on earth or lost so high I'd never touch the ground again.

He broke the kiss and instantly I was boneless, exhausted, so satiated I let myself sink against his hard body, not caring that I clung to him, that I

had my arms wrapped around his neck, my head resting on his shoulder. In that moment I trusted him wholly, completely.

He rose from the chair, the towel falling fully away from me. Nikolai lifted me easily into his arms as if I were that little doll he kept calling me. The whisper of air touched my temple, the slightest brush. I probably imagined it, but I wanted to think it was a soft side of Nikolai kissing me, telling me in his own, silent way that he had me, that everything was okay. Even if I knew it wasn't.

The sound of blankets ruffling, the feeling of softness greeting my boneless body.

"What about tonight? What about our wedding night…" I murmured sleepily, unable to finish the sentence as I started feeling heavier and heavier, my body sinking deeper and deeper into the mattress.

But Nikolai didn't say anything in response, didn't comment that he hadn't taken me, hadn't gotten his own pleasure.

Blankets covered my naked body. My eyes were already closed, sleep pulling me under.

But what I was aware of was that I drifted off to sleep alone in that massive bed with my virginity still intact on my wedding night.

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CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

Amara

I didn't know where we were going, and for some reason I was too afraid to ask Nikolai, who sat silently beside me in the back of the Mercedes that had picked us up from the hotel just minutes before.

I glanced over at my husband. His focus was his cell phone as he typed out a message, his body so big that he seemed to take up the entire backseat. Or maybe it was just the vision of him that was firmly implanted in my mind. A beast, larger than life.

He was all-powerful, dangerous, someone who'd kill for me as easy as it was to take a breath in and exhale it out.

And he took my breath away.

"My little doll stares an awful lot," he said without looking up at me.

I shivered at the way he said "little doll", at the tone and inflection of his voice. It covered me like a hot balm, like heated honey.

"There's a lot of you." I felt my eyes widen as those words spilled from me before I could stop them. *Oh God, the humiliation*. My face heated unbearably but I couldn't look away even though I desperately wanted to. I saw the corner of his mouth twitch as if he found it amusing.

He tucked his cell back in the inner pocket of his jacket and rested fully against the leather seat, turning his head to look at me. Nikolai still had that hooded cast to his eyes, his black lashes too thick and his eyes too blue to be on a man as masculine as him.

A man should not be that attractive, shouldn't look that good when he wasn't even trying. He instantly made my body warm and soft and so very

wet.

And all it took was a pointed look at me.

His gaze held mine for long moments and then I saw him start to lean forward. He was coming closer, crowding me in the best possible way. When his gaze dipped down to my mouth my breath caught and my lips parted on their own. He was going to kiss me. I wanted him to kiss me. Right here in the back of this Mercedes. Right here where the driver could see it all.

And I wouldn't stop him.

But before he could give me what I wanted the car was slowing, his smile was growing, and he was leaning further away from me.

I blinked back rapidly and watched as he smoothed his hands down his leather jacket. He didn't wear the normal attire I'd seen the men in my life wear, the men who worked for my father. My father.

They all wore tailor made suits, expensive cuts of cloth that hid the monster beneath the material. But not Nikolai. Aside from the tuxedo on our wedding day, I'd only seen Nikolai in dark jeans, an equally dark shirt, and that black leather jacket molded over his hard, very male body.

The car coming to a stop jarred me out of my clear sexual appraisal of Nikolai and I looked out the passenger side window, feeling confusion fill me as I stared at what was right outside. My mother and father's home.

"You took me to my parents' house?" My heart was thundering as the reality of that settled in, as the fear of the why filled me until it spilled over. Was he bringing me back here because he didn't want me? Oh God, had I done something wrong?

"Nikolai?" His name was a soft croak from me. I looked at him and heard the panic in my voice, knew it covered my face. All I could think about was what did I do wrong? *What did I do wrong? Oh God… what did I do wrong?*

At first his expression was stoic but then the dark slashes of his eyebrows came down slightly in a frown.

"I did something wrong? You're giving me back to my father?" I hated–*hated*–that I sounded so weak right now, but God it was terrifying to think of what my father would do if Nikolai told him he didn't want the marriage to last. That he didn't want me.

I didn't realize my hands were shaking until Nikolai placed his much larger, heavier one on top of mine. Instantly I calmed, stilled, but I could

still hear the racing of my heart in my ears, feel it almost bursting from my chest.

Nikolai's jaw was clenched tight as he looked out the window behind me. I could see the pulse beating beneath his ear frantically, felt his fingers tighten around my hands that were still on my lap.

"I thought you'd want to say goodbye to your brother and sister, your mother even." He turned those bright blue eyes back on me. "It's your father you're so afraid of." It wasn't said like a question because he knew. He knew. He had to. The Bratva couldn't be that different from the Cosa Nostra. Their traditions, the rigidity, the severity of how the men were had to be similar. The same.

The question took me off guard for a moment and I jerked, as if electrocuted, or maybe slapped. I didn't have time to respond because Nikolai's door was opening, the driver holding onto the edge.

"Sir," the driver said but when Nikolai didn't move or speak, the driver cleared his throat. "Would you like some extra time? Privacy?"

Nikolai didn't respond, just kept staring at me, kept his hand on mine, his fingers tightening ever-so-slightly with each passing second.

And then the weight of his palm was gone, his big body uncoiling from the car as he stood and stepped out. His door slammed shut and I closed my eyes and exhaled, feeling the heavy silence all around me.

It only lasted a moment before my door was being opened and my husband held his hand out for me. It was automatic as I slipped my palm against his, allowing him to help me out. I smoothed my free hand down my tunic then my leggings, before gripping the soft material of my shirt and letting Nikolai lead me up the steps to the front door.

It swung open as if automatically sensing us and Beatrice, one of the servants, stood on the other side with her hands clasped behind her back and her head bowed.

"Mr. and Mrs. Petrov," she said respectfully as we neared. "Master Bianchi wasn't expecting you."

"I know," Nikolai growled and tightened his hand on mine. "I assumed his own daughter wouldn't need to call ahead to visit her family." He strode inside without waiting for a response, never letting go of my hand.

We entered my childhood home and the front door shut behind us softly. We only stood there for a few seconds before I heard a rhythmic pounding sound coming closer and closer. And then I saw Claudia come barreling

down the stairs, her grin wide, her dark hair fluttering behind her as she raced forward.

I couldn’t help but laugh as she cleared the stairs and slammed into me, giving me a full body hug, one that felt far too good for the short time I’d been gone. She tightened her arms around me and I did the same, feeling my eyes prickling with tears of what, sadness? Happiness? The loss of the only thing I’d never known?

“I missed you.” Claudia’s voice was muffled against my shirt and jacket.

I squeezed her back. “I've only been gone for a day,” I said with a little laugh in my voice, trying to make things light. She tightened her arms around me once more and I laughed genuinely this time, but there was an ache in my heart.

“Hey, now. It’s okay.” I pulled her back to look into her blue eyes. “Are you okay?” Her face was a mask that started to break slightly before she gave me a bright smile. A fake smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

I wanted to dig a little deeper, ask her what was truly wrong, but I knew. I knew why she looked at me with those wide blue eyes that were identical to mine and Gio’s. No, I knew what the issue was. Our father.

She tried to brush it off as if it were nothing as she murmured under her breath, “it’s father.”

She exhaled and stepped back fully. “Father has been a beast since something happened at the wedding, something he refuses to tell anyone.”

I shifted on my feet as nervousness slammed into me, and glanced over at Nikolai. He stood a few feet to the side, a still and imposing form that watched me as if I were the only important thing in the room.

My breath caught.

Although I knew Nikolai could hear what we were talking about, he didn’t act like he did, didn’t show any emotion over what Claudia had just said. I looked back at my sister, glad she didn’t know about Eduardo. My father had clearly cleaned it up efficiently fast so now one but a small team of his men knew what had gone down.

“I’m sure it’s just work stuff.” I finally found my voice to say to my sister.

She exhaled but nodded and I was thankful that she accepted what I said, even if I didn't know if she believed me. I was glad she didn’t make me lie even more. I didn’t want to tell her about any of the horrors or

darkness that happened in our world even if she was surrounded by it. Even if I knew she was fully aware of it all. I wanted to keep her safe and innocent and protected from it all.

Gio and my mother stepping into the foyer drew me out of my thoughts and I embraced both of them, answering their conversational questions automatically. I could hear Gio talk about “safe” topics with Nikolai. Sports. Stocks. The fucking weather. It was awkward, and it was evident my brother didn’t like my husband.

But all I could think about was my father, how he’d make Claudia’s life even worse because of the situation with Edoardo. How my father no doubt blamed *me* for Edoardo’s death, and because I was now a married woman and out of his house, she’d take my place for his wrath.

It was those thoughts that had me moving away from my family and walking toward a place I had no business going.

My father’s office.

All conversation behind me dimmed and I glanced over my shoulder to see all three of them watching me. Nikolai’s eyes were hard set, his jaw clenched, his hands tight fists at his side. But he didn’t move closer. He didn’t stop me. Maybe he knew I needed to do this, to talk to my father, to try and smooth out the wrinkles and calm the rough waters. I was the only one who could protect Claudia. Not even Gio would go against my father. He was too busy, always on errands by our father, learning the “family business”.

I knew it was all strategically orchestrated by Marco, that he was being molded and brainwashed and shaped into what our father wanted. The perfect heir. The perfect soldier.

I walked down the hallway and stopped in front of my father’s office doors, reaching out automatically and digging my fingers into my palm before relaxing it and lifting it up to bring my knuckles down on the wood.

He made me wait a solid minute, standing behind that closed door, before he barked out that I could enter. I pushed the heavy door inward and stepped inside, leaving the door open behind me. A survival instinct.

I smelled faint hints of cigar smoke and a fire that had burned long ago in the mantle, chard wood tinged the air and clinging to the books that lined one wall. He sat behind his imposing, massive oak desk, his reading glasses pushed up the bridge of his nose as he brought his pen down across a sheet of paper.

“What?” he said in a bored tone without looking up at me.

I didn't say anything for a second as I picked at the edge of my shirt, a lone thread barely hanging on. Just like me. Just like Claudia would be if I didn’t fix things.

“I–I…” I couldn’t manage to say anything else, couldn't find my words.

My father set his pen down, removed his glasses, and leaned back in his chair. And only then did he look up at me. No expression on his face. No happiness to see me. No love that his daughter was here, that she was a married woman and starting her own life now.

Nothing.

He lifted an eyebrow and steepled his hands in front of his face. Waiting. Waiting. The silence stretching out between us, making me on edge, making me even more scared. But he did that on purpose. It was a tactic, *his tactic* to make me even weaker than he already saw me.

“I was wondering if we could possibly discuss Claudia visiting me once I'm back in Desolation?” The thought of leaving my sister here and traveling so far, all the way across the country, had my belly tightening. “ Maybe she could help me get settled? I’ll be alone over there, and I’m sure Nikolai will be busy with work.” I swallowed.

He stayed silent. Still kept those fingers steepled in front of his face.

“Just a thought,” I whispered.

“Hmm,” he finally said. “Just a thought?” He placed his hands on the table and drummed his fingers. “You made quite the mess last night with Edoardo.”

I opened my mouth and snapped it shut, smoothed my hands down my thighs over and over again. “It’s unfortunate about Edoardo, but–”

My father slammed his hand down on his desk so hard his lamp shook from the force. He slowly rose, his palms braced on the smoothed wood. “There are no excuses.” His eyes narrowed. “What exactly were you doing with your guard, hmmm? Being a little whore?”

My throat was so tight. Too tight. I couldn’t admit that I’d seen him and Francesca, couldn't put her family through any of that. “I just needed a breather. Edoardo followed me, must have thought he was still there to watch over me.” I was surprised I sounded as sure and strong as I did.

“Is that right?” He straightened but I held my ground, tipped my chin up, and kept my focus on his eyes. “I see you’ve gotten a bit of a backbone

since getting married to the Russian.” He moved around his desk. “He must have fucked all the weakness from you.”

I slapped a hand over my mouth in shock and disgust that my father would say such crude things to me. But the man advancing on me and looking at me with such malice and hatred was even worse than the person I’d grown up to fear and hate.

He stopped a few feet from me and curled his lip in disgust. “You remember what the hell I said. You remember to obey that Russian bastard no matter what.” He took a step forward. “I won’t have you fucking up anything else.” Another step closer, but I still stayed where I was.

I craned my neck to look into his face. “Father,” I said in a sweet voice, hoping it would placate him to see I was just a woman. Just the daughter he pawned off. “I’ll be good. I’ll make you proud.” *Fuck you.*

He stayed silent.

“But if you’d allow, I’d love to have Claudia visit. If you’d allow it.”

He smirked. “If I allow it.” The humor faded. “I had quite the mess to clean up.”

Back on that. Back to it being my fault.

Faster than I anticipated, my father grabbed my wrist in a bruising hold, so tight that I felt it wrap around my bone. Tighter and tighter he squeezed before jerking me forward and baring his teeth.

I wasn't aware of the sound of pain leaving me until it spilled loudly from my mouth and filled the office. And then I heard it. Footsteps coming forward. Hard. Heavy. Nikolai’s. My father is in front of me gripping my wrist one second, and the next he was being tossed across the room and stumbling back against his desk.

I stared at Nikolai’s huge, imposing back as he stood between me and my father. His shoulders were rising and falling, and I heard the heavy rush of his breathing. His anger was a tangible presence in the room, bigger than life itself.

“You…” Nikolai said and took a step toward my father. “You made a fucking mistake.” His accent was so thick right now that his English was barely distinguishable. I knew if I didn't stop this something horrible would happen.

And it wasn’t that my father would be killed by my husband's hands, but that Nikolai would face repercussions over this.

I found myself at Nikolai's side, my hand curled around his larger one. I stroked my thumb over his inner wrist and slowly he turned his head from where my father still stood by his desk.

"Let's go. Let's just go." I said that over and over again like a mantra. I didn't know when I'd gotten to the point where I'd embraced this new life so thoroughly. But here I was, fearful of Nikolai being hurt even though he seemed indestructible. "Please," I whispered and I watched as that rage that covered his face lessened marginally and he exhaled.

He looked at my father again and gritted out, "that was the last time you ever touch her again." And then Nikolai was weaving his fingers through mine and leading me out of the house.

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CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

Amara

My tears had long since dried, but all I could think about was Claudia, how she'd looked at me with a detached expression, her big blue eyes showing me what her future held.

It was the same one as mine. I glanced down at my wrist, a bruise in the form of my father's hand covering my pale skin.

I closed my eyes and thought about those last few moments when Nikolai ushered me out of the house. My mother and sister had followed us out to the car, and the look of worry on my mother's face had been tangible.

I thought about how I'd stared into Claudia's wide blue eyes, felt her apprehension and fear, and pulled her close to me in a hard hug and whispered in her ear.

"I'll come back for you. I'm not leaving you here. I promise."

And then there was Gio, who'd stood by the front door with his hands clenched tight at his sides, his focus on my wrist. His jaw had been locked tight, his eyes narrowed. I had to hope and pray he'd protect Claudia from our father's wrath until I got her away. I had to believe he loved us more than he cared about our father's approval.

I had to believe that or I'd die.

"*Please,*" I'd mouthed to him, and when he'd given a firm nod I'd felt air fill my lungs.

"I'll come back for you."

And I would. I felt that fill every part of me so solidly there was no other option.

I was vaguely aware of the private jet's engine starting and pulling me out of my thoughts. I heard the sound of the pilot and the copilot rattling off airplane jargon. I sensed rather than saw the flight attendant walking up and down the small aisle.

But what I was very aware of above all of that was Nikolai's intense stare on me.

I looked at him, not surprised he had those blue eyes trained on me. I couldn't call any part of Nikolai soft. He was seated but looked tense, jagged, like a sharp blade that would cut through you as easily as a hot knife through butter.

"I have to get her out of there." I knew he was aware of what I said, what I meant.

But he didn't respond, just reached across the short space between our seats and gently took my hand in his. He pushed up my shirt, showing the ugly coloring of my wrist, and I heard a low, deep sound of disapproval leave him. He gently—God, so gently—stroked his finger down my inner forearm, stopping right before he got to the bruise.

And then his touch was gone and he was leaning back in his seat, his focus trained out the window. A muscle under his scruff-covered cheek flexed and I swallowed, knowing that sensation I felt coming from him, knowing that hard, almost unreadable look on his face.

He wouldn't let this end.

We sat there for long moments, so long I didn't think we'd speak the rest of the flight to Desolation. I lifted my legs onto the seat and curled them close to my chest, adjusting myself so I could look out the window.

We'd been in the air for half an hour now, the time surprisingly passing by in a blur, but the tangible energy that kept coming from Nikolai couldn't be ignored.

I'd stopped glancing over at him, knowing I'd see the same thing each time. Hard resolve that he would deal with my father in the way men like him did

Violently. With finality.

But I didn't have the energy or the emotions to care, to try and talk him out of it. It wouldn't have mattered anyway.

All I cared about right now was getting Claudia safe and out of that house, away from my father. Because surely now, after all of this, after the

spectacle that happened in his office with Nikolai, my father was especially volatile. And Gio and my mother could only protect my sister so much.

“Your mother is under your father’s thumb so deeply she’s embedded there,” Nikolai finally said and I was so startled by the deep timbre of his voice that I actually jerked slightly in my seat and turned to look at him.

I licked my lips and nodded, not trusting my voice for fear it would tremble from the force of my thoughts and emotions. And I didn’t want to appear even weaker than I felt I was already coming across. I was ashamed that I wasn’t stronger, that I hadn’t fought harder, that I hadn’t just taken my sister and ran.

My mother was already too far gone in my father’s clutches to listen to reason. She hadn’t protected us all these years, and instead had been complacent in his wrath and hatred toward us. She’d let his anger wrap around us with the reasoning, the explanation that it was “just how things were”.

Just how things were.

I was done with that.

“You act surprised.” I uncurled my legs and stretched them out, not realizing I’d been in the same position for so long that my legs were cramped and aching.

He lifted his hand and ran it over his jaw before smoothing it up and down his thigh. I watched the act, remembering how he’d done that last night in the hotel room before he patted his lap and told me to come sit down.

I felt a flush move over me, unexpected arousal washing away all my worry, which just made me feel even guiltier.

“Women in the Bratva, or at least in Desolation, aren’t like that.” He leaned back in the seat further and spread his legs a little wider, the position shouldn’t have been as attractive as it was.

And he was so big, his legs so long, his torso so muscular and wide, that he dwarfed that leather seat.

“They stand by their man, powerful in their own right. They don’t cower. You can’t when it concerns the world we live in.” There were shadows behind his blue eyes, things he wasn’t telling me.

I didn’t ask him about his mother. Maybe that’s where that darkness came from.

“Of course this isn’t how it always is, or was.” His jaw clenched at that last word. “Even though it should be. But there’s a lot of evil that lurks right under your nose.” He lifted his hands, palms up, as if that explained it all.

“You're worried about your sister.” He said it point blank and I didn’t hesitate to nod.

“My father is going to take it out on her.” I looked out the window again, seeing nothing but white and blue, so far up I could almost pretend that we’d never land again, that we could stay high above the world where nothing could touch us.

“Your father will take what *out* against your sister?”

I dragged my tongue over my bottom lip, feeling that soreness from when he’d bit the flesh last night, once again another reminder of what we’d shared and done.

I didn’t answer for long seconds, but when I finally did look at him I could see no judgment, no anger directed toward me. There was this calculation in his eyes, this steady resolve. How was he so different from the men I grew up around? How was he so different from my father?

“Because of the situation that happened with Edoardo.” My voice cracked on that last word as memories of all that blood, the brain splattering across the wall beside me, slammed into my mind like a broken record.

Over and over again. On repeat.

“He blames me, thinks I was having some clandestine rendezvous with him, a scandalous affair that would have ruined his reputation.” I looked down at my lap and twisted my fingers together. “And I don’t care that he thinks I’m a whore. I don’t care that he blames me for anything or everything. I just want to protect my sister. I know that because if he can’t punish me for all that has happened, he’ll take it out on Claudia.”

He stayed silent, too silent that I thought I overstepped bounds, taking liberties that would put me in a bad position with my husband.

Although I didn’t think there was any love lost between Nikolai and my father, saying anything negative in regards to Marco wasn’t something a daughter should do, especially to her husband who had professional ties with him.

I started to feel beads of sweat line my temples, fear skating down my spine. I was shifting on the seat, twisting my shirt in my hands. I couldn’t sit still, all the horrible, awful things that could and would happen bombarding my brain so that’s all I could see and think and feel and hear

“Amara.”

It was the hard, rough sound of Nikolai’s voice pulling me out of my thoughts that had me blinking to clear my vision and looking over at him.

He was leaning forward in his seat, his elbows resting on his thighs as he stared at me severely.

“I…” I was rubbing my palms up and down my legs and noticed the way his gaze dipped down to watch the act for just a second before he brought his focus back to my face.

“Just forget I said anything. Everything‘s fine. Everything‘s fine.” I looked back out the window and bit my bottom lip, feeling like a fool for running my mouth the way I did.

It didn’t matter how Nikolai acted toward me, how he protected me… killed for me. How he’d assaulted my father to keep me safe. None of that mattered at all because he was still the bad guy. He was still part of the same world I was, and in that world, no matter what he said, I had to learn my place. I had to learn to think before I spoke.

I’d only make things worse, not only for me, but my sister as well.

“Come here.”

I looked at Nikolai after that hard command and watched as he slowly straightened before leaning back in the chair, taking on that relaxed position once again. He had his forearms resting on each side of the seat, one hand crawled around the edge of the armrest, his fingers stroking the leather slowly.

He didn’t have to ask again. I braced my hands on the seat and pushed myself up, taking the three steps that required me to stand in front of him.

Despite the fact I was now taller than him and he was looking up at me, I still felt so tiny, so incomparable to his presence.

He was like the sun and I was the earth orbiting around him. He was bright and big and without him I felt cold and dead. It was the most unexplainable emotion I’d ever felt, this feeling that one person held so much power over me.

It was a weakness, another one I certainly didn’t need, but also one I couldn’t get rid of no matter how much I desperately wanted to.

“Come here.” His voice was deep and dark and delicious and I felt it all the way down until it curled my toes.

I knew what he wanted. And so I breathed out slowly and looked down at his slightly splayed thighs, the way he still rubbed his thumb across the

leather of the armrest, and then looked back to his face, where I saw his hooded expression.

I positioned myself on his lap, both of my legs resting between his, his hand automatically sliding down the center of my back to settle right above my ass, at the small of my back. His palm seemed so big that it encompassed the entire area.

His finger and thumb were on my chin, slight pressure added as he turned my head toward him. My breath caught in my throat. It wasn't because of the look on his face, or the way he stared at my lips as if he were a hungry, starving, ravenous wolf.

No, it was none of those things, it was the way his thumb stroked the length of my spine, a gentle touch that went against everything that he seemed to stand for, that I saw when I looked into his blue eyes.

"Come here," he murmured and I felt the slightest pressure on my chin where his thumb and forefinger still gripped me gently. He could've easily moved forward and pressed his lips to mine, used force to bring my mouth to his. But no, he wanted *me* to take the initiative. He wanted *me* to kiss *him*. And I did.

I leaned in and sealed my mouth to his, his lips firm but smooth that I started to get lost in that small sensation.

Our lips moved together, slow at first, inexperienced from me. But he ate my passion, swallowed my breath, and didn't let up until I was writhing on top of him like a desolate fiend for anything he'd give me.

When he slid his palm up my back and gripped my nape, keeping my mouth to his, stroking his tongue along the seam of my lips until I opened for him, I knew the sliver of control he'd given me was over.

He was now back in control and I softened and grew wetter over the fact.

He held the power. It was his. *It's always been his*, I realized in that moment.

"Look at you giving into me so easily. So fucking perfectly."

God I loved how thick his accent became when he got aroused, loved how I felt how hard he got because of me. And I was amazed he had the power to wash all my worries away with his touch and the words that spilled from that wicked mouth.

"I could fuck you right now and you'd let me, you'd part those pretty pale thighs and let me, wouldn't you?"

I couldn’t respond, I was so breathless.

“I could fuck that fear and concern out of you. I could shove my cock so far in you, little doll, take you for our very first time thirty thousand feet in the air, and make it so all those hard thoughts can’t consume you anymore because *I’ll* be the one doing it.”

His mouth was so close to mine, no longer kissing me, but every time he spoke his lips brushed against mine.

I quickly realized Nikolai was an expert at diverting, and changing the situation around so it was in his favor, so he had the power.

He’d done it.

He slipped that hand down the length of my spine, slowly. So slowly it ached. And then he was gripping my ass, curling his fingers around one cheek and giving the flesh a hard squeeze.

I moaned against his mouth, that discomfort so good it made everything feel so much better.

He broke the kiss and trailed his mouth along my jawline and to my ear. “It’s going to be fine,” he whispered against the shell and I shivered on his lap. “I’m going to make sure it’s fine, *malishka*.”

“You can’t know that.” My voice was a hiccup of sound. “My father is a monster.” I should have felt… something akin to shame or guilt for putting this on Nikolai’s plate. We hadn’t even been married for twenty-four hours. But when it came to my sister, I knew I’d crawl naked and broken on the floor if it meant she was safe.

Nikolai pulled back and stared at me so hard and for so long I felt stripped bare. “Little doll.” He murmured, his hand now on my waist in a nursing grip. “I’m no stranger to getting rid of the monsters that lurk in the dark.”

There was something right in his voice. I remembered bits of what I’d read, rumors whispered of him and his brother killing their father. Patricide.

He leaned in and dragged his tongue along my bottom lip so slowly I felt every inch of him. “And when it comes to you… I’ve never been more dangerous.”

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CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

Amara

I'd been in a haze the rest of the flight, and it hadn't helped clear my head being on Nikolai's lap, which of course is where he made me sit the entire time, his hand resting on my hip, his thumb pushing up my shirt enough that he could stroke the strip of skin exposed.

And I was still thinking about that—*feeling it even*. It had been a twenty-five minute drive from the airstrip to our destination, which appeared to be an underground garage located at a red brick building. The sleek, black luxury car descended and I leaned back in the seat to stare at the long strips of lighting that illuminated the gray cement that covered everything.

All I'd had to go off of on Desolation, New York before coming here was the frightening rumors, and the harrowing bits and pieces I'd found off the Internet. But even then I knew those online stories and pictures showed the *best* parts, which wasn't saying much since the city lived up to its name to a fault.

The drive from the airstrip to Nikolai's place had been done in relative silence, with Nikolai sitting beside me on his phone working, a scowl on his face as he typed out emails and sent out texts. But I'd been fine with the quiet, in fact I'd embraced it so I could further allow myself to let all of this sink in,

My new reality.

And as I stared out the tinted window and got a good look at the city that was my new home, it was everything I'd envisioned.

Cold. Unforgiving. Broken.

We passed through two gates, both stationed with a man dressed all in black. They waved the car through, and I was about to ask Nikolai about all the security when the car stopped in front of a single silver elevator. I only had a moment to exhale before the driver was out and opening the door for Nikolai.

Nikolai held his hand out for me and I automatically slipped my palm against his, allowing him to draw me out of the vehicle. The door shut with an audible *click* and I could hear the echo bounce off the low ceiling. I glanced around and noticed several luxury cars lined up on either side. All dark, all sleek.

“Who needs this many cars,” I murmured before I realized I said the words out loud, and once again successfully put my foot in my mouth.

And then the car was pulling away from the curb and we were left alone. I could hear the sound of my heart beating as Nikola slipped his hand up the length of my spine, pushed the long fall of my hair over one shoulder, and curled his hand around the back of my neck in a clearly proprietary way.

Once in the elevator and the doors closed, Nikolai entered a code in the keypad, as well as a sleek silver card into a small slot. But he kept his other hand curled around my nape, and the heavy, warm feeling of that presence had my belly flipping and heat pooling between my thighs.

All I could hear and smell and sense was Nikolai. He was dark consuming and so dangerous that it gave me this thrill.

I felt like Pavlov’s dog, becoming wet and needy just by being in the same room with him, just from the sight and smell of him.

All too soon the elevator came to a stop and the door opened.

He led me forward into what was an anteroom, the large space having a minimalistic touch to it. A few abstract black-and-white paintings covered the walls, and a plush rug met my feet the deeper we went into the room. Nikolai slid his fingers off my nape so slowly I knew he’d done it on purpose, to really let me feel him.

He stepped up to a large dark wooden door with a silver curved handle. When he reached out the side I noticed another small keypad on the wall similar to the one in the elevator.

After a series of beeps, he pushed open the front door and stepped aside to allow me to enter first. The interior was dark at first, but once I stepped

fully inside a soft glow illuminated the foyer as if activated by a motion sensor.

The lights were still off in the rest of the apartment, and my eyes adjusted to the darkness in front of me. I could make out a living, set lower than where I stood, the design showing the very same minimalistic style as the anteroom.

I heard rustling behind me and looked over my shoulder to see Nikolai taking off his jacket and hanging it on the silver hook by the door, then reaching into his pocket to take out his cellphone and a set of keys. He tossed those in a small bowl that sat on a long, narrow table against the wall beside the door.

“I thought you’d keep your pretty new wife in that hotel room for at least a week. Break her in the good old fashioned Russian way.”

A startled squeak left me and I snapped my focus in the direction of where the male voice had come from. I felt Nikolai move up behind me instantly, a heavy, warm presence like a protective wall.

It was then I noticed a large body sitting in the corner of the room, the shadows concealing him almost fully.

“Thought you’d have to carry her over the threshold because you’d made it impossible for her to walk.”

I backed up a step, slamming right into Nikolai’s hard body. His hands came up to rest on my shoulders, his fingers squeezing me slightly.

Nikolai growled, “watch it, Dmitry.” A beat of heavy silence passed before Nikolai spoke again. “I won’t remind you to show respect again where Amara is concerned.”

Hard, tense silence followed, thick enough it was hard to breathe as Dmitry just stared at us, still covered by darkness, the lights from Desolation barely reaching him. But then there was a subtle movement of him inclining his head and I exhaled all that tension away.

“Making yourself at home here is going to have to stop.” Nikolai said through gritted teeth.

“Is that so?” There was almost… humor in Dimitry’s voice.

Nikolai’s body grew harder behind me. “Yes.” That lone word was hard and tight and pushed through clenched teeth.

More silence. More thickness coating the air.

“Fine. I guess being married now affords you some privacy.”

Nikolai made a deep sound behind me that was reminiscent of a growl.

“How was the flight?” Dmitry said in way of changing the subject.

I felt Nikolai’s body shift a little, then felt his warm breath tease the side of my neck. “The flight was fine.” More warm breath along the side of my throat… more clenching of my inner muscles. “Oh but how we wanted to do more. Isn’t that right?” His voice was low, too low for anyone but me to hear. “*Mmm*, how I wanted to do so much to you, little doll.”

My breath hitched and my face felt hot that he was saying these things where Dmitry could easily hear.

Dmitry laughed low and a second later he was rising from the chair.

“I told you to wait in the anteroom.” Nikolai’s voice lost all that sexy Russian deepness as he moved out from behind me so he was now blocking my view of the rest of the apartment.

“Sasha was thirsty.”

I looked around Nikolai’s arm, expecting to see a woman come out of the shadows, Persephone to Hades perhaps, but there was just the sound of a clock ticking down the seconds.

“Should have kept her at your place then.”

And then I saw slight movement beside Dmitry’s leg. A sleek, toned body coming to stand beside her owner. Sasha was a dog.

“You know Sasha doesn't like to be alone.” Dmitry reached down and ran a hand over her head. Now that my eyes had adjusted I could see him more clearly… could see he was watching me.

Dmitry took another step forward and the motion activated lights flared to life. I stared at Nikolai’s brother, saw him smirk at me, then glanced down at his canine companion. A sleek black and brown Doberman sat on her haunches beside him, her ears pointed straight up, her black eyes trained on me. If I didn’t know she was alive, hadn’t seen her move just moments ago, I could have mistaken her for a statue for how still she was.

He kept stroking her head, his sleeve pushed up his forearm so I could make out the tattoos that lined his wrist and snaked up to disappear under his shirtsleeves. But even those dark designs couldn’t hide the very clear–and numerous–scars that were raised underneath the ink.

“Why don’t you just get to the point of why you’re here?” Nikolai had shifted once more so he was standing at my side, and I felt instantly warm when his hand settled on my lower back. But he only kept it there for a moment before he slowly slid it up, between my shoulder blades, and curled his fingers around my nape again.

God, why did I find that possessive, dominating hold so damn arousing?

I couldn’t help but feel as if Nikolai did this as some kind of brand of ownership. And I couldn’t find the energy to care. Because I liked it. I liked the heavy weight of his palm on my nape. I liked the feel of his thumb stroking up-and-down the side of my neck, over my pulse point right below my ear.

“I have business outside of the city that’s going to require my attention for a few days.” Another long pause. “I need you to watch Sasha,” Dmitry said in an even tone.

I looked at the Doberman again.

“I’m not a kennel, Dmitry.”

“Don’t act like you don’t like her company.” Dmitry slid his gaze over to me. “It’ll only be a few days. Besides, you know I don’t trust anyone else with her.” Dmitry slowly grinned as he kept staring at me. “Not allergic to dogs are you?”

I found myself slowly shaking my head.

“Great,” Dmitry said with as much enthusiasm as a cold man like him probably could muster. “It’s settled then. A couple of days tops. I think you and her will get along well, Amara.”

I was aware of a rough sound leaving Nikolai, felt the air in the room grow hotter, the tension increasing.

“You and I have some business to discuss, don't we brother?”

I looked at Nikolai, saw the hard set of his jaw, the clench of muscle underneath. His nostrils flared once before he gave a hard nod toward his brother.

And when he looked at me I saw that truth in his eyes. Whatever business they had to discuss most likely had to do with me… with my father and the massive mess that had been left back on the East Coast.

“You’ll be okay for a couple of minutes?” Nikolai asked and I was sucked into his orbit, as if he were the sun pulling me closer and closer.

Although I didn’t feel like I would be fine. I felt like I was coming apart at the seams and didn’t know if that was a frightening realization, or one that I ultimately would welcome.

I had to be stronger. *I have to be stronger.* Not just for me, but because of the situation at hand, the most important reason. Which was getting Claudia out of that house and away from Marco, away from being further molded and brainwashed into thinking that's how her life should be.

Nikolai looked like he wanted to say something else, and God did I want him to touch me again, even if it was just a stroke along the side of my neck, a reassurance that he was coming back.

When did I get so attached? When did I find myself wanting far more than I should with this man in such a short amount of time?

It seemed so insane yet I couldn't convince myself it was wrong.

"Give me a moment and then we can settle in for the night."

I found myself nodding, and when he did lift his hand, when he tightened his fingers around my chin, I felt myself soften. He leaned in and kissed me softly, so softly it was like he hadn't even kissed me.

And then he was gone, both of them stepping out into the anteroom, leaving me with Sasha, who sat still, watching me, those dark eyes far more intelligent than any canine should have been.

I wasn't necessarily a dog person, had never grown up with any kind of pets in my life, to be honest. Father never allowed it. So I sat in the garden and threw seed out in front of me, watching as the sparrows and chickadees, even the paired doves, pecked at the ground.

But Sasha didn't seem like a "pet". She was very much Dmitry's companion.

I kept utterly still, not sure if making sudden movements would startle her, cause her to be defensive. So I stood there, picking at my shirt, feeling sweat start to bead my temples.

This was ridiculous. She was just an animal, not giving me any indication that she meant me any harm. And surely Nikolai wouldn't have left me alone if he thought I was in danger.

I didn't know if I was going to move toward her or step back, but before I could make up my mind, she was slowly rising and coming toward me, her movements steady and slow, as if she weren't sure about *me*. It was almost humorous.

She was sleek and muscular, reminding me of a predator stalking closer.

It was reminiscent of when I'd seen a feral cat once at the back of my father's home. Its black and white body had been crouched low to the grass, slowly creeping toward a little bird that was eating the seed I'd thrown on the ground. I wouldn't have let the cat get the little bird, but I'd watched in rapt awe nonetheless. So stealthy. So quiet that the tiny bird didn't even realize, wouldn't have a chance.

The closer Sasha got, the more tense I became. She was just a foot from me now, her ears twitching slightly, the little nub of her tail not moving. Weren't dogs supposed to wag their tails if they were in a good mood?

Oh God. She was going to pounce, just rip my throat out and maul me.

And then she sat on her haunches, lifted her paw, and pawed at my leggings. I was so stunned that a small sound left me involuntarily. She did it again, and again, and I found myself reaching out with a shaky hand and tentatively running my fingers over the top of her head, keeping my movements slow and steady so as not to startle her.

And when she let me run my fingers across that bump on the top of her skull and behind her ear, I gave a little laugh.

She huffed out and gave a low groan, and if I didn't relate so much in that moment, I might have laughed.

"I know, girl."

The front door opened a second later and Nikolai was stepping inside and shutting the door behind him. I heard the faint click of a lock engaging, and then we just stood there and stared at each other.

Nikolai lowered his gaze and I knew he watched as I pet Sasha.

"I knew she'd take to you right away," he said almost to himself. "Go on, Sasha, lay down."

Sasha didn't move. In fact she growled low, which had Nikolai's eyebrows rising slightly.

"Seriously?" He growled in return and said something low in Russian, which had Sasha huffing out once more, but she did move over to the couch and laid her lithe body down on the rug, her focus never wavering from Nikolai.

"What did you say to her?"

"I told her if she didn't cut the protective bullshit, I'd feed her the kibble from the corner store instead of the steaks Dmitry left for her in the fridge." His lips twitched and I realized he was teasing. Nikolai Petrov… teasing. "I told her if anyone was going to protect you it was me."

My heart skipped a beat at that, but Nikolai didn't give me a chance to let his words flutter in me and spread outward, didn't allow me to let his meaning soak in. Because he started coming toward me, stalking just like Sasha had done… just like a lion did to the gazelle before he pounced and took it down.

He stood in front of me smelling like dark spices and remnants of the icy air outside. The plane ride had been long, the time change something I'd have to get used to. And with evening settling over the city, sleep sounded heavenly.

That was, it had until Nikolai stood right in front of me, both of us alone, the sound of my heartbeat increasing, and the feel of his body heat surrounding me, having any feeling of tiredness leaving instantly.

He reached out and toyed with the end of a lock of my hair, rubbing it between his fingers before lifting his gaze to my face. For long moments he just watched me, and with each passing second I grew hotter, as if I were standing under a heat lamp.

Wet and soft and ready for something I'd never experienced before.

"I bet you're so damn pretty when you cry," he murmured and smoothed a thumb under my eye as if he pictured a fat tear rolling down.

And even though I could assume the worst by his comment, that he wanted to hurt me and draw those tears from me, I felt the *truth* of what he meant.

Because thinking of him making me cry has me wet.

"Come, let me show you the rest of your new home."

…rest of your new home.

That should have scared me more than it sent a thrill of excitement through me.

I hadn't been able to understand how I'd become so comfortable with Nikolai in such a short amount of time. We knew virtually nothing about each other, yet the more I thought of it, the more I opened my mind and tried to sift through all the little pieces of its truth, that's when I understood.

No longer did I feel like that bird living in a gilded cage, singing a beautiful song not because I was content, but because I had a broken heart.

I was finally free for the first time in my life. I could breath and stretch my wings.

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CHAPTER

NINETEEN

Amara

Nikolai held out the Thai takeout box but I placed a hand on my belly, then lifted my palm toward him and shook my head. “I don’t think I can take another bite,” I said with a grin, then followed it with a soft moan of discomfort. “I don’t think I’ve ever eaten so much in one sitting.”

I had my father to thank for that, a man who would watch our portions and scold us if he thought we had too much to eat. In his eyes all he saw us as was a pawn to use, and his pawns had to be thin and pretty and only there for appearances.

After Dimitri left, Nikolai gave me a tour of his apartment. Although the term *apartment* seemed grossly understating given his place. The penthouse was two levels, with the lower one housing the living room, kitchen, two bedrooms, and a full bath. There was a modern staircase that led up to the upper level, which was taken up completely by the master suite and bath.

The entire time he told me about the history of the building, how he purchased it years ago, gutted it and had it completely renovated. His apartment was the only one in the building, but he also had some storage space on an upper level, and an office that he used one below. It was strange seeing Nikolai in that latter light… a legitimate businessman and not only as a criminal.

But I supposed those two lives were interchangeable in the underworld.

He told me about all the little details, the mundane pieces of information that seemed so very “normal”, for what a couple shared. He let me know the schedule of the staff who came in and cleaned, and how he had a

secretary who came in several days a week and did office work on the lower level**.**

He talked about how the building was secure, that I was always safe when he wasn't at home, that he had men who patrolled the perimeter, and security cameras that monitored everyone who came and went.

He assured me no one would touch me while I was here, not even my father.

He explained his schedule could have him gone for long hours each day, but that he'd make sure he was home so we could eat dinner together every night.

Home.

Hearing him say that one word, expressing in that way how we shared the same space, probably shouldn't have made me feel as good as it did.

After that he suggested I take a bath and relax, and I'd been so stunned to see this gentle side of him that I'd stood there long after he'd left the master suite, just starting after him. Of course I didn't have much to go off of in being surprised by anything he did, but because he was a man in the same kind of criminal organization my father was, I assumed they were one and the same.

And although I wasn't a fool in thinking he wasn't just as deadly—maybe even more so—than my father, in only a few days' time I was finding out he wasn't like the evil monster I'd painted him out to be. Not to me at least.

So I'd taken a bubble bath, soaking in that massive tub until the water had become chilled and my fingers had pruned up. Then I'd wrapped myself in a push robe, until my skin had dried, and slipped on some leggings and an oversized sweater.

And here I was, sitting beside him on his couch, stuffed with good food, my head warm and loopy from the two glasses of wine I had, and feeling a different kind of heat fill me.

I stared at the television and let the words roll around in my head until they finally decided to spill forth. I reached for my glass of wine and finished it off, the sweet notes of berries hitting my tongue before sliding down my throat.

"This is all so…" I set my glass down and glanced over at him. He watched me stoically, then cocked an eyebrow as he waited for me to finish.

“...domesticated.” I felt my cheeks beat at that admission and focused back on the TV.

“What did you think it would be like?” I shrugged and looked over at him again. “Thought I’d have you chained up in my bed so I could have my way with you any time I wanted?” He grabbed his beer bottle off the table and settled back on the couch as he brought the rim to his mouth and took a long pull from it.

I shouldn’t have felt the burst of humor at his words, but I found myself laughing softly.

“You should laugh more.” He brought his beer back to his mouth and drank deeply. “It’s pretty.”

My laughter died as something deliciously heated took its place.

“It’s just…” embarrassment had my words stalling.

“Don’t go all shy on me now, little doll.” The way he said that, and the look on his face told me he was thinking the same thing I was.

What we shared on our wedding night and on the plane.

“Unless you *prefer* to be chained up to my bed and at my mercy?” His voice dropped to a rougher octave then, and I physically shivered.

I knew he saw my physical reaction by the way his pupils expanded, his lips barely parting as he sucked in a breath. I was embarrassed by his words, not because he spoke them, but because of how much I wanted them to be true.

I was seamlessly turned on by the idea of Nikolai having his way with me.

His chuckle had me looking over at him, my face getting redder as embarrassment filtered through me. I was so transparent, his words having a physical effect on me that I couldn’t control. I gritted my teeth and stared back at the TV, but a second later I felt his thumb and forefinger gently pinch my chin as he turned my head in his direction.

Gone was any kind of amusement, and in its place was a seriousness that had my breath catching in the center of my throat. For long moments Nikolai didn’t speak, just stared into my eyes, his gaze slowly working along my chin and along the line of my jaw, before he made the trek back to my lips.

Back-and-forth, so slowly, as if he memorized every part of me.

With gentle pressure, he pulled me forward. I held my breath, but then started panting, my chest rising and falling far too fast to be considered

normal. But Nikolai didn’t comment on my physical, visceral reaction to him. Instead he pushed his thumb between my mouth, making me suck on the digit.

Our mouths were so close, my eyes barely open, this lethargic sensation moving through me. I could’ve blamed it on the wine, on the full stomach, but it was all because of Nikolai.

I felt so dainty sitting beside him, tiny and small against his massive body. All I could do was breathe him in. All I could see was him. All I could feel was *him*.

He hummed low and I felt myself get slick, my body preparing itself for *him*. And then I felt the brush of his lips against mine. It couldn’t even be considered a kiss for as light as it was, yet I felt it in every single part of my body.

He slid the fingers that were holding my chin to the back of my neck. I let him take the lead, and liked that he was in control. I had a feeling even if I was experienced, I still would’ve wanted a man like Nikolai to show me how it was done.

With his hand on my nape, and more pressure being applied so he could tilt my head to the side, he opened the kiss. I moaned at the flavor of him, felt euphoric when he curled his fingers around my hair and tugged at the strands.

With each passing second his hold on me became more forceful, his kiss more demanding until he held a chunk of my hair in his fist, that sting causing my pussy to be soaked.

And that’s when he pushed his tongue inside, stroking me from the inside out, pressing the muscle against mine before retreating and repeating the action all over again. We did this for so long, slow and thorough kissing, that I was liquid between my thighs.

I was drenched, the soft material of my leggings rubbing against the most sensitive part of me. I was braless, something I now wished I hadn’t done because my nipples were rock hard and rubbed tortuously against the material of my sweater.

“I’ve never tasted anything sweeter” “His words were rumbled against my mouth and I felt the vibrations all the way down my body to settle right between my thighs.

He pressed his tongue in and pulled it out. In and out. In and out. The act couldn’t be called anything but a mimic of fucking. God how I wanted

it–him–right now, so much so that my pussy clenched hard. And when my inner muscles relaxed I felt more wetness spill from me, no doubt creating a wet spot in the center of my leggings.

I tried to clamp my thighs together but my position made it impossible, what with one leg bent on the cushion and the other one on the ground.

He broke the kiss but he wasn't nearly done with me yet. *Thank God.* He dragged his tongue over my top lip, then my bottom, lapping at me over and over again, slowly licking as if he were a lion grooming me. And then he dragged that tongue along my jawline, moved it lower and lower until he was sucking at my pulse point right below my ear, scraping it with his teeth harder and harder with each passing second. I feared he'd break the skin.

But I desperately wanted him to.

Mark me. Mark me so everyone knows what you did to me.

"I know what you need," the vibrations of his voice went through my neck and I tilted my head to the side even more, giving him better access. His low chuckle was pleasure filled, and before I knew what was happening, his hands were on my hips and he was lifting me off the couch so suddenly that I had to steady myself with my palms on his broad shoulders.

I blinked open my eyes and looked down at him, watching as he stared up at me with eyes so dark they no longer appeared blue.

He said nothing for a long seconds and all I could hear was my frantic breathing. Whereas I felt disheveled, crazed almost in my need, my arousal, Nikolai looked ever composed. To always have to be in control must have taken so much energy.

And when he leaned back on the cushion and draped his arms over the back of the couch, slightly spreading his legs wider so I could fit between them, I knew I wouldn't stop this.

I knew I would let it go as far as it could. All the way. Until I was crying for more, tears sliding down my cheeks as I begged and pleaded for something… anything that would make me feel even more alive.

It was as if he was waiting for me to make the first move, yet I could see the tightness in his body, the tension around his eyes. He might be giving me the illusion that I had control right now, but I knew that wasn't the case.

But I knew Nikolai never gave up the reins, was always dominating in every aspect of his life, and I felt a shiver working its way through my body

as I slowly licked my lips, loving that the small act had the muscles in his neck clenching as he watched me.

My hands were at the bottom of my sweatshirt and I was pulling it up and tossing it aside before I could lose my nerve. He didn't move, showed no reaction as I exposed my breasts to him. Of course this wasn't the first time he saw them, wasn't the first time he touched them… had his mouth on them. But for some reason this moment felt different.

I felt a surge of power fill me. I tucked my fingers underneath the edge of my leggings and pushed them down, my breathing so fast and frantic I felt lightheaded as I stepped out of them.

And then I stood there naked, totally bared to him, watching as he raked his gaze from my eyes, over my breasts, down my flat belly, and stopped at my pussy.

He stared at *that* part of me for so long I started to squirm in place, felt beads of nervous sweat line my temples… felt my inner muscles clench and my pussy grow wetter.

Nikolai stared and stared and… stared. God, he looked at my bare pussy as if he were memorizing it.

"Spread your legs," came his dark command and I shamelessly did as he ordered.

Cool air wafted over my heated flesh and I felt my eyes widen when my arousal started to slide down my inner thighs. Face hot as fire and probably redder than ever before, I was about to close my legs out of sheer embarrassment when he *tsked*.

"You'll keep your legs open so I can stare at that pretty cunt and see how wet you are for me." And then there was silence as he did just that, his gaze tracking that bead of pussy juice making its way down my inner thigh.

I was humiliated. I was turned on. But I stayed still with my legs spread, *feeling* his gaze on me.

"Look at how you're such a good girl." He still didn't move but trailed his focus up my body to look in my eyes again. "You're doing so well. There isn't anyone who pleases me like you do."

That praise shouldn't have hit me right between the legs, shouldn't have made me feel drunk, but here I was, swaying with the force of it.

I allowed myself to look my fill of my big Russian husband, at how broad his shoulders were underneath the button-down shirt that encased all that masculinity. I could see the subtle definition of his muscles under the

expensive fabric, and felt my breathing increase. And then I was staring at the massive erection digging against his pant leg.

“You want to see it?” He taunted, erotically teased. He didn’t give me a chance to respond, not that I could have found the words anyway. “Of course you want to see it,” he crooned, his accent much thicker. “The fact you’ve never seen a cock before makes me so hard, sweetheart, harder than I’ve ever been.”

My heart was pounding so hard and fast behind my ribs, and when I licked my lips his chuckle was instant, his focus never leaving my face. He lowered his hands to his pants, undid the button, and pulled down the zipper so it sounded obscene in the living room.

I didn’t take my focus off of his face, too shy, too nervous even though I could see the movement of what he was doing, of how he pulled his dick out and started stroking himself.

His eyes became even more hooded, his mouth parting. *Oh God.* I wanted to clench my thighs harder, feeling more wetness spill from me. But I didn’t want to disobey him.

“Go on. Look at it.” The corner of his mouth kicked up in a semblance of a smile.

I found my hands curling into tight fists on their own accord as I lowered my gaze down to stare at what he did. I took in a sharp intake of breath as, the first time in my life, I watched a vulgar, sexual act. Calling it vulgar sounded almost wrong, as if what he was doing was immoral or wrong.

He was my husband. I was his wife. This was what married couples did.

And God he was big, long and thick. Too big. Too thick to fit inside of me.

I was transfixed as I watched his tattooed hand stroke up and down his cock. Root to tip. Root to tip. And on every upstroke he squeezed and pushed a bead of clear fluid out the slit at the crown.

He did this over and over again until that pre-cum slid down his dick, following the line of that thick, pulsing vein that ran on the underside of his cock.

“Get on your knees.”

I snapped my gaze back to his face, feeling my eyes widen in shock. “W-what?”

He made a disapproving sound. “Be a good girl and don’t make me tell you again.” He kept stroking himself in unhurried motions. “You know you want to, so sink down on those knees and come closer, sweetheart.”

It only took me a second before I found myself doing just that, like he had a chain around my body and one firm yank and I was obeying him. But this wasn’t about compliance or force.

This was about the pleasure I got acting on his commands.

“Closer, baby girl.”

I crawled on my knees until I was between his spread thighs, the scent of him invading my senses and nearly having a moan spill from my lips. Nikolai smelled like clean sweat, dark spices, and unrestrained power.

“I know you’ve never sucked a cock before. But I want to hear you say it.” I was transfixed at the sight of another bead of pre-cum forming on the tip before following suit down the underside of his shaft.

My mouth watered shamelessly, and I knew he’d asked me a question but I was so hazy with this reality that I couldn’t comprehend anything but counting my heartbeats.

It seemed to be the only thing that kept me firmly rooted to this moment.

“Go on, *printsessa*. You know you want to please me.”

What’s wrong with me that I crave to do as he says?

I forced myself to look away from him jerking off, but the sight of his pleasure written across his face could’ve had me orgasm right then.

My inner muscles clenched, my clit throbbed, and I was so wet I was a mess between my legs.

I didn’t know why I was so shy saying the words he wanted. I thought them loud and clear. We’d done far more explicit things, too. “I’ve never… I’ve never done that.” My voice was breathless.

He made a deep sound from deep within his chest. “No, baby girl. I want you to use your words.” A moment of silence passed before he continued. “Because we both know how wet that cunt gets when you’re embarrassed.”

I squeezed my legs together so hard a moan spilled from me, my clit getting pinched between my lips.

“I’ve never sucked cock before.” I felt my cheeks heat and was about to look away when he made another rough sound, forcing me to look at him without uttering the words

“And how much do you want to suck my cock? How much do you want to move that tongue over the head and lick up all the cum that’s coming out?”

I didn’t know when I lifted my hands, or when I placed them on his knees, but I found my palms moving over his thighs, and found my body moving closer to his.

“That’s it. That’s a good girl. Come closer and lick my cock, swallow the pre-cum I’m giving you.”

I curled my fingers against his thighs, digging my nails into the expensive material of his slacks. My focus rested on his shaft, at the flushed, bulbous head, at all that clear fluid leaking from the tip.

I was leaning forward before realizing I did the act. I dragged my tongue around the crown, saltiness exploding in my mouth. It was such a startling sensation, an unusual flavor, that I snapped my gaze up to look at Nikolai.

He watched me, his lips slightly parted, his eyes nearly closed, nothing but pleasure reflected back to me.

“Open wider and take me as far as you can, let me feel the back of your throat. Let me hear you gag.”

I felt like I was in some kind of alternate reality, doing things I’d only fantasized about, hearing dark words I'd only ever envisioned as I lay alone in my room.

And wished for… more.

I sucked the head into my mouth, not knowing what to do, but envisioning Nikolai’s dick was gelato I ate in July, wet and cold and melting all over the place. I closed my eyes and sucked and licked, dragging my tongue over every inch, the harsh sounds leaving me turning my body inside out in the best way.

My jaw ached, my mouth watered continuously, but I didn’t stop.

“Look at you,” he purred. “Making a mess all over my cock. I bet your pussy is so drenched you’ve made a wet spot on the carpet.” He tightened his hold on my hair when I ran my tongue along the underside of his dick, picturing a fat drop of sweet gelato melting down it. “You’re a dirty fucking girl, aren’t you?”

I could only moan.

“Letting me make you do these filthy things without putting up any kind of fight.” He lifted his hips slightly and made me take more. “I like that I

can make you my whore.”

My pussy clenched.

“But only mine. Only mine,” he whispered those last two words.

“You’re doing so good, baby girl. Don’t stop now. Take a little bit more.” Nikolai added pressure to the back of my head until I was forced to take another inch of his cock.

My saliva glands worked overtime, spit coming out the corners of my mouth and covering the sides of his dick.

“That’s it. So good.”

A little bit more pressure on the back of my head had me sinking down another inch. My shoulders tensed, my hands clenching at his thighs. It was too much. He was too big.

“Look at how well you’re taking me, sweetheart. You’re making me feel so good.”

And then I took another inch, feeling the tip of his cock at the back of my throat.

“Your mouth is so warm. So wet.” He grunted and lifted his hips, forcing a little more dick in my mouth. “That’s it. Swallow around the tip.” I gagged on how thick and big he was. “Yeah… that’s it. So good. Perfect.”

He pushed his cock deeper inside me again and again, forcing the brown of his erection to the back of my throat. “Swallow it, sweetheart. That’s a good girl. Just like that.”

The sloppy, wet sounds that came from me as I sucked at his dick was obscene, embarrassing. His fingers dug into my scalp, massaging, tugging at the hair. I was a slobbering mess on his dick, spit everywhere, dripping down my chin and onto my breasts.

Tears cascaded down my cheeks, and the entire time I stared into his eyes, unable to look away as he stuffed my mouth full of his cock, forcing me to do the most depraved act I could have ever envisioned doing. He humiliated me. He turned me on even more.

I clenched my thighs together again and relaxed. Doing this repeatedly, pinching my clit between the folds of my pussy, giving myself pleasure even though it wasn’t enough to send me over the edge.

Heavy tears on my cheeks, spit coming out of my mouth. He bared his teeth as he pushed my head back down on his dick, grunting when I tried to shake my head. It was too much. He was too thick and long. I was suffocating, drowning.

“Breathe through your nose, sweetheart.” He pulled me back and gave me a few seconds to suck in some much needed breath, before he pushed me forward once more.

Over and over he did this, using me, using my mouth for his pleasure, to fuck himself. And I let him. I wanted it. I was so wet I wouldn’t be surprised if there was a mess on the floor between my thighs.

I felt him tense and knew he was close to orgasming. I never wanted anything more than I wanted him to cum in my mouth, to swallow it all, to know that *I* was the reason he lost control.

And so I renewed my efforts, taking as much as I could, feeling my throat contract, constrict around him. He growled low and tightened his fingers in my hair so hard a strangled sound of pain left me.

But he was too big, it was too much. My throat felt raw, and I still couldn’t breathe. As if he read my thoughts once more, he jerked my head back with a harsh tug of his hand in my hair, the action so sudden his shaft sprang free of my mouth with a resounding *pop*.

Spit trailed down my chin and dripped down my bare breasts, causing my nipples to become even more taut, more aching. I was panting, my lips swollen, numb, the tears still rolling down my cheeks.

“Look at how gorgeous you are with your mouth all red and swollen from sucking my dick.” He roughly ran the pad of his thumb over my bottom lip, pulling the flesh down and letting it go with a snap. “Look at how dirty you are with spit covering your chin and tits because you choked on my cock.”

He leaned forward and ran the thumb he’d just used on my lip to smooth over my cheek, collecting a tear and bringing the digit to his mouth and dragging his tongue over the pad.

“I was right. You are fucking pretty when you cry.” He leaned in then, circling my throat with his palm, his hold loose, but I felt a calmness somehow settle in me. “And your tears are the sweetest thing I’ve ever tasted… so far.” And when he dragged his tongue from my jawline over my cheek, licking up my tears, growling deep and harsh, I didn’t stop the moan that left me. “Because I bet your cunt is even sweeter,” he whispered.

And then I was lifted off the floor so suddenly the world spun. Nikolai put me on his lap so easily it was as if I had no control over my body, as if I weighed nothing… was insubstantial.

His hands on my waist were painful and brutal, and I knew marks would mar my flesh, but I'd never wanted anything more.

Nikolai used the hold he had on me to rock my body over his, his cock nestled between my pussy, my slickness causing this delicious, smooth fiction.

My pussy lips framed that massive cock, his thickness so substantial all I could think about was how could–would–he fit? How could he possibly stuff all of that into my unused body?

"It'll fit. I'll make sure you take every fucking last inch when the time comes," he growled and I made this strangled noise in the back of my throat.

Had I said my worry out loud? Did I care? The answer was a resounding no.

He moved me easily over him. Back and forth. Back and forth. I felt myself reaching that pinnacle, that precipice, the edge of where I'd fall over and wouldn't care if I hit the ground hard, crushing me, wiping away any thought or feeling or emotion that I'd ever had.

I curled my hands around Nikolai's shoulders, dug my nails into his flesh until he hissed, until he growled and held me harder. And then his mouth latched onto the side of my throat, his teeth grazing at my flesh hard enough the pain sparked something deep and dark and delicious inside of me.

"You're going to come for me, and you're going to do it right now, baby girl." His mouth was still on my neck, that soft, tender spot of flesh where my throat and shoulder met. He bit down hard enough I cried out, then moved his lips to my collarbone, digging his teeth into the flesh and bone.

I swore I heard him snarl, felt his fingertips bruise into my waist.

He kept biting me, leaving marks, sucking at my skin. And it hurt so good. It was the sweetest agony.

I pressed my pussy down on his cock hard, rotating my hips, shamelessly fucking myself on him until I came so forcefully my head fell back on my neck, too heavy to hold up myself, my eyes closed on their own, and I gave into the pleasure.

It was only when I was aware of the sounds fading that I came back to consciousness. Nikolai was murmuring in Russian, soft things that I wanted to think were endearments, but a part of me thought that they were filthy, nasty words.

And God that made me wetter, a fresh gush leaving me as if I hadn't just orgasmed harder than I ever had before.

"I'm not done with you yet," I heard him say right before he bit the side of my neck once more hard enough I gasped, hard enough I thought he might have broken the skin.

And then I was flat on my back, my thighs spread so wide the muscles protested. He was between them a second later, his mouth covering my sensitive, drenched pussy.

"Mmm, yeah, that's what I fucking thought."

My hands instinctively went to his hair and I held on as he dragged his tongue through my folds, teased my hole, then flattened that muscle and moved it up to my clit.

"I knew your cunt would be sweeter. The sweetest thing… my fucking obsession." He sucked that bundle into his mouth and hummed, growled, and sounded like a crazed beast. "I want you to tell me you're a whore for me, but only for me." His words were muffled and wet sounding against my pussy and I cried out at how sensitive I was, how good it is.

"It's too much. It's too much." I didn't know if I was pleading that his words were crossing lines, or that his mouth was too forceful as he tried to pull another climax from me.

"It's not too much and you'll give me this. You'll give me everything because you're mine, Amara." He stared at me in the eyes for a second before he spit between my legs, soaking my pussy in his salvia.

I gasped, watched his eyes became lit with fire for the inside out, and then he was eating me out.

He sucked my clit into his mouth and drew on it hard. "You'll only ever be mine." Another hard, painful… so, so good pull on my clit. "Now tell me, *malishka*, tell me what I want to hear and what you want to say."

I gasped and gasped and gasped and then cried out through my orgasm, "I'm your whore. Only yours, Nikolai."

I was vaguely aware of the animalistic sounds he made while he was relentless between my thighs, while he lapped and sucked at me…. while he spit on my pussy then licked it back up. It was dirty and wrong. *It's so right and feel too good.*

He kept me spread open, refusing to let me get away.

I slowly—painfully—came down from my high, crying, begging, praying to a God that wouldn't listen. My fingers tugged at his hair hard

enough I knew it had to hurt, but he stayed right there between my legs and ate me out, his licks slow and gentle now.

And then he was away from me, the chilled air brushing over my pussy, which forced my eyes open. But he didn't move far. He shifted on the couch so his legs kept mine open, his focus trained on my pussy. His hand was wrapped around that massive, girthy cock, and he stroked himself fast and hard from root to tip.

"Look at that," he groaned and used his free hand to slide up my inner thigh. I moaned at how good that felt, that soft touch when he did something so dirty. But that was short-lived when a second later he brought his palm down and slapped my pussy.

"Ahhh." I arched my back, my breasts shaking, the sting and burn instant.

"Again," he demanded as he still furiously moved his palm up and down his cock. He slapped my pussy again and I cried, begged, curled my hands against the couch cushions so I didn't move away.

Nikolai smoothed his hand over my erotically abused flesh, soothing, me, driving me up higher and higher and higher.

And when he brought his palm up to the crown of his cock and squeezed, his forearm flexing, the veins standing hard viciously, I held my breath.

His neck muscles clenched as he groaned then barked out a hoarse sound. He angled his erection toward me and hot, thick jets of milky white cum shot out of the tip and splattered my pussy, my thighs, even my lower belly. It was everywhere. He was everywhere.

And his orgasm seemed to go on and on, never-ending, and all I could do was lay there and take it all, let him bathe me in his seed, paint me with his mark.

When he was done the only indication he gave was a subtle relaxation across his shoulders and the rapid rise and fall of his chest. His eyes were barely open as he stared down at me, as he looked at all the cum on my body.

"God, you're a fucking mess, *malishka.* Hottest fucking thing I've ever seen," he murmured. He reached out and smoothed his fingers along the streaks of seed, smearing it, rubbing it into my thighs and belly, my pussy lips and then teasing my opening and pushing some in there, too.

I gasped at the feeling.

He held his hand up, showing me how glossy they were, coated with his orgasm, and he made me taste it, pushing those digits into my mouth and against my tongue. He was salty and sweet and darkly addicting. And I found myself sucking on those fingers, lapping up all his seed like I was starved for it.

I'd never known addiction, never felt the undeniable pull of needing something so badly it hurt. But as I stared up at Nikolai, I realized this must be what it felt like.

This must be what it was like to know you could never go back to what was before.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY

Amara

"*Priv'yet malishka*." The way he said that was all sexually laced and filled with innuendos.

I might not speak Russian, but I recognized a few words since being with him, and knew *malishka* meant "baby". Just knowing he called me that endearment had me softening in the most liquid way.

"I want to take you to dinner tonight."

Nikolai's rough voice drew me out of my book and I glanced up at him. He stood at the top of the stairs, leaning against the wall and looking far too sexy right after a shower.

His dark hair was wet and not yet styled, his upper body naked and all those tattoos in clear display. He wore a pair of dark tailored slacks, but the button was undone and I could make out that hard, defined V cut of muscle lining his six-pack.

My face heated as I remembered what we'd done last night just on the couch not ten feet from me. My pulse ratcheted higher as I shifted on the tufted stool I sat on and my thighs protested because Nikolai had kept them open so long and with so much force.

And I felt every part of my tingle when I swallowed and the soreness lingered from when he stuffed his cock down my throat.

"Okay," I said softly, surprised I had it in me to even answer right now.

I felt my heart thump in my chest when he gave me a slow smile and a long once over, as if he, too, remembered the filthy things we'd done.

When he turned and headed back into the master suite, I exhaled. I heard a phone ringing, then the distinct, muffled sound of him speaking in Russian. That distraction helped bring my thoughts and body back to the present.

It was still early in the morning when I'd woken up and seen Nikolai sleeping soundly beside me. I'd felt his body heat in all the right places.

I'd never slept beside anyone other than my sister when she'd been younger and I let her crawl into my bed after she had a nightmare, so I'd been thankful he'd still been sleeping as I'd snuck out.

And what I'd done couldn't be called anything but that.

After getting ready as quietly as I could in a pair of leggings and a soft cashmere sweater, I made my way downstairs and into the kitchen. It had taken me ten minutes to figure out the coffee machine, a fact that made me feel ashamed. We'd had servants to handle these things, when this task, as well as other daily, household things, should have been common knowledge to me.

After I'd made myself a cup of coffee that had been so strong, I'd shuttered and coughed, and then had added damn near half the milk and sugar we had in the kitchen, I'd explored the apartment. With the sunlight streaming in the large windows, the penthouse had seemed far more inviting. Nikolai had built-in bookshelves across the room, many of the titles in Russian, some even Latin. I'd spent another ten minutes just pulling books out, cracking spines, smelling the pages, and feeling the leather under my fingertips.

I had picked a random one in English and found a little nook, grabbed a blanket off the couch, and sat on a little plush stool by the window. I stared out the glass and watched the cars and people below. It didn't matter the luxuriousness of Nikolai's apartment, once I looked outside all I could see was the broken sorrow that was Desolation.

And although the view wasn't horrible, with the main street that ran parallel to this building pretty quiet and as clean and taken care of as any place in this rundown city could appear, I couldn't help but picture all the emptiness I'd seen as we drove through the city to get here.

I heard him coming closer and tried to focus on the book, but the words blurred together. I couldn't concentrate and found myself reading the same line over and over again before looking up at him through the long fall of my dark hair.

He was on his cell phone, his words deep and low and in that sexy Russian. And God did he sound delicious when he was speaking that other language. He wore a suit, finally tailored, molded to fit his strong physique.

Nikolai could pull off business attire as well as a bad boy in a leather jacket. I'd take him anyway I could get him. And that realization shocked me even though it probably shouldn't have. I was thankful that I was attracted to him, grateful that so far he hadn't treated me badly.

I knew things could change at the drop of a hat. I'd only been in his presence for a couple of days. This could all be a farce, a mask he put in place. But I wanted to think it wasn't. I wanted to hope it was more than anything I could have dreamed of.

But the longer I stared at him, the harder I thought about all the things we'd done. How he touched me, the things he said to me. They all sounded so genuine. They sounded real.

His voice rose, his clear anger picking up with whoever he was speaking with on the other end. And when he got to the bottom of the stairs, he barked out one last word, disconnected the phone, and shoved it in the inner pocket of his suit jacket.

And then he was staring at me and I couldn't find the strength to look away, didn't care that he saw me watching him.

"Come here, *malishka*."

"Come here, baby."

I set the book aside and stood, padded over to him on bare feet, the cold wood underneath my soles doing nothing to cool me off. When I stood right in front of him, he stared down at me with an intense expression covering his face, one that I could have construed as angry but I knew better.

I didn't know how I was aware of something so sure, but I knew with certainty the look on his face was one of dark passion and intense need.

"I have some work to do that will keep me away for several hours, but I'll be back and we can have lunch together." His voice dropped lower and he took a step closer. "And by lunch I mean spreading those pale thighs and feasting on your pussy."

Oh. God.

I took a step back on instinct, the fight or flight instinct at war. On one hand I could feel the beast within Nikolai, having the survival mode running high. But I desired him more than I had the urge to flee.

I couldn’t think, couldn’t do anything but stand there and stare at him with wide eyes and lips parted, chest rising and falling, nipples hard because I was insanely aroused.

Faster than I could anticipate, he reached out and curled his hand around my throat, used the act and his strength to move me backward until the wall stopped our retreat. Nikolai added pressure on my neck to lift up until I was on my toes.

Although I could breathe it was hard, but I didn’t fight, didn’t try to get his hand off. I was wet, already soaked so that my arousal dripped between my thighs, my inner muscles clenching for something substantial, something thick, hard, and long.

Something only Nikolai could give me.

He pressed his entire body against me, had his mouth on mine, devoured me with that kiss, plundering my mouth with his tongue and teeth, biting nipping, drawing blood until I found my hand wound around his neck, my nails digging into his nape.

He licked my lips and kissed me harder, grinding his erection against my belly. I wanted him, those words on the verge of spilling from my mouth. I wasn’t too good to beg my husband to fuck me, to finally consummate our marriage, to take my virginity and make me his. But he stepped away so suddenly that I faltered, the words drying on the tip of my tongue.

I had to brace my palms on the wall behind me to steady myself, his form wavering in front of me as my vision went in and out, endorphins and adrenaline rushing through my veins until I thought I would pass out.

He lifted his hand and ran his thumb along his bottom lip and I could see a smear of blood on the pad. He looked down at it, then dragged his tongue over the digit, licking at that blood.

I lifted my hand and touched my mouth, feeling the soreness on my lip. He reopened that wound he's given me on our wedding night, broke open the seal so I spilled into his mouth, so he took a part of me into himself.

It was insanely animalistic, wholly primal.

For long seconds he didn’t say anything, just stared at me, and I allowed myself to look down the length of his body and saw the massive erection he sported behind his slacks.

He reached down and ran his palm over the hard ridge, causing my breath to catch.

“This is going to be a bitch to drive with.” I couldn’t help it. A bubble of laughter slipped out of me and I pressed a hand over my mouth. Nikolai smirked and I felt the lightness settle over my shoulders.

“You need to smile more. Prettiest thing I’ve ever seen.” The last part was so low I didn’t know if I’d heard him correctly.

Who would’ve thought he could joke.

He walked up to me, smoothed his thumb along my cheek, and leaned down to give me the sweetest, softest kiss along my forehead.

And with a harsh breath he turned and left, shutting the front door behind him and leaving me there to sag against the wall and catch my bearings.

Or try to at the very least.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-ONE

Amara

Nikolai led us toward the restaurant with a steady hand on the small of my back. I tightened the shawl around me, the blistering wintry air picking up and ruffling my hair along my shoulders.

Most of my clothing from back home had come that afternoon, boxes of clothing and personal effects that once I started going through them, they didn't feel like *me* anymore.

I'd have to take Nikolai up on his offer to go into Manhattan and get an entire new wardrobe. I'd waved off the suggestion, but after looking at all the clothing I'd brought from home, all the items that my father had to approve before I'd been allowed to wear it, now seemed toxic.

And as I sat on the edge of the bed and stared at all the clothing I'd pulled out, Nikolai had come into the master suite, as if he'd read my mind, and handed me a white box wrapped in a blood red ribbon.

Inside that box had been what I was currently draped in. A gorgeous full-length dress that seemed far too fancy to eat at a restaurant in Desolation, thigh-high stockings, silky garters, delicate—intimate—undergarments, and high heels definitely not made for winter.

And as I'd looked at myself in the mirror dripped in lacy black decadence my husband had picked for me, items that were new and strange and never something I'd pick out for myself because it was far too sexy and showed off my curves, I felt more like myself than I ever had.

Nikolai held the door to *Vasyli's* open for me and I glanced up at him through the fall of my lashes to give him a smile. Although he didn't return

the gesture, I saw the heat behind those blue irises as he blatantly checked me out right there on the sidewalk, right there where the patrons could see.

Once we were inside, the door shut soundless behind us and the soft hum of conversation filled the interior. Diners stopped their chatter to glance at us. I didn’t miss how the women eyed Nikolai with interest, whereas the men swallowed and quickly looked away.

The restaurant couldn’t be called anything but authentic Tsar inspired Russian, with traditional Eastern European music playing softly overhead, a Russian flag proudly displayed on one of the walls, and a very imperial royalty atmosphere.

I was so busy looking at the very traditional and culturally aesthetic Russian theme, that I didn’t realize we were moving again until I felt Nikolai’s palm once again settle on my lower back as we were led to a booth in the back by an older man with a shock of white hair and bright blue eyes.

Once we got to the table, the older gentleman, who introduced himself as Akim, took one of my hands in both of his and brought it to his wrinkly face, giving my knuckles a soft kiss and murmuring something in Russian.

And then he was gone and Nikolai was gesturing for me to take my seat first before he joined me in the spot beside where I sat.

We didn’t have to wait long for someone to come by and bring a bottle of wine. They showed it to Nikolai and when he gave a small nod the waiter poured a small sample into a wine glass. After a taste test and Nikolai’s approval, both our glasses were filled and we were left alone once again.

I noticed there were no menus but I didn’t question it when the first courses were brought out, as if the chef and staff dropped everything to cater to Nikolai.

I'd never had authentic Russian cuisine before, but with every dish that was presented and a small description by Akim personally, I felt like I’d traveled to a foreign, faraway place and was experiencing firsthand his Mother Country.

I realized, as the minutes passed and I became lighter, more relaxed, that I'd been tense, almost expecting this awkwardness, this uncomfortableness to fill the space. This was our first date. *My* first date. But as Akim initiated so much of the conversation, telling me snippets of his life when he was a child in Russia, and how his mother and grandmother made these dishes, I

grew comfortable. I laughed genuinely at his jokes, blushed at his compliments, and felt Nikolai's gaze on me intently the entire time.

The rest of the meal passed pleasantly, with me savoring each and every dish that was brought out, and I got to the point where I didn't mind Nikolai's intense gaze on me. In fact, I felt flushed and heated every time I looked over and his gaze lingered on my mouth as I brought the fork or spoon, or even a cup to my lips.

I'd never felt so attractive in someone's eyes before, never felt like I was the object of someone's obsession. But I knew that feeling now.

Once the table was cleared and a fresh bottle of wine was brought out, I lifted a hand to my face and touched my cheek, the skin warm from the alcohol, a pleasant buzz filling my veins.

Nikolai leaned back, one forearm resting on the table, the other on the armrest of his chair. And of course his gaze on me.

"Come closer," he said in a low voice.

I had a feeling that even though he could have easily reached out and tugged my chair closer, jerk me toward him in a very dominant way, he liked the fact I'd obey him so readily.

But he said nothing once I was close enough to smell the spicy dark notes of his cologne. "What now?" I asked softly and his eyes grew even more hooded as the corner of his mouth curled seductively.

"We're going to sit here and finish off our wine and you're going to act completely natural the entire time."

I felt my brows lower in confusion, not understanding what he meant. But before I could ask or even try to sift through the meaning of his words, the heavy weight of his hand was on my knee, his fingers curling against the fabric of my gown as he slowly pushed it up.

My back went ramrod straight and I glanced around the restaurant. Although it was late enough in the evening and there were only a few tables filled, all I could think about was one of the patrons looking over and seeing what Nikolai was about to do.

"What are you doing?" I whispered and placed my hand over his, which had now crept up to my upper thigh, bringing my dress along with it and exposing the garter of my hose.

I felt like my eyes were so wide as I stared at each person at the tables, but when I heard Nikolai make a gruff noise, I glanced at him and saw his focus was on the black lacy garter on my upper thigh.

“I’m so fucking glad I picked this out for you to wear.” He kept moving his hand up, my palm over his adding zero force so he was able to do whatever he wanted. “Grab your wine glass and take a drink, sweetheart.”

I swallowed, my throat suddenly so tight and dry it felt like it was closing in. But I did what he said, reached out with a shaky hand and curled my fingers around the stem of the glass.

The liquid inside sloshed ever-so-gently as I lifted it off the table and brought it to my mouth, taking a long drink at the same time he slid his hand inward. The wine had no flavor, not with how turned on and humiliated I was, not when I couldn't think of anything else but the skilled touch of his fingers.

Anyone could see us, a sliver of shame filling me at the knowledge he was going to touch my pussy, play with me in public.

Nikolai kept snaking his hand along my inner thigh, and then his fingers were brushing along that sensitive area where my pussy and inner leg met. I nearly choked on the wine as I swallowed, and I continued to look around the restaurant, just knowing someone was going to glance over and see what was happening.

“You’re doing so good, *printsessa*, being a dirty girl for me.” He moved his lips to the shell of my ear. “But you’re only going to be dirty for me, isn’t that right?” He had his fingers over the lace that covered my pussy and I sucked in a breath when he added slight pressure.

When I gasped and tried to close my legs, he laughed low and deep.

“You know what would happen if anyone ever touched you?” His voice was so low by my ear that I wasn’t sure I heard him. He added more pressure to my pussy, right over my clit, drawing slow circles over that swollen bead of tissue. “Do you know what I would do to them?” He moved his fingers away from my clit and I was about to protest, but the words lodged in my throat when I felt him pull the edge of my panties aside and slip his fingers under the fabric.

At that first touch of his fingers along my bare skin, I let my head fall back on my neck and had to force myself to close my eyes. The pleasure was instant and a soft mewl left me, one that made my face burn with shame and had me snapping my mouth closed and gritting my teeth.

“I’d make them hurt. Real slow. Make it really gruesome.” He rubbed the pad of his finger over my clit and my entire body tightened. “If they looked at you with lust I’d take their eyes.” He twisted his hand so he could

still rub my clit but was now circling my opening. “If they touched you I’d take their hands.” He gently pushed his fingers into my body and I felt my eyes widen and more liquid spill from my pussy. “And if they thought to take you from me, take anything from you, I’ll kill them as easily as I killed Edoardo.”

My pleasure was rising so swiftly, I squeezed my fingers around the wine glass until my hand ached.

“I’ll cut off little pieces of them, then bring my victories to show who’s protecting you, to show you how far I’d go to ensure you’re safe.”

My eyes fluttered closed then as pleasure raced through me. He kept rubbing my clit in slow, steady circles, adding a little pressure as he circled my hole. I felt my orgasm start to climb and knew there wasn’t anything to stop it. But I tried.

“Oh no, baby girl. You’re going to give it to me because you know how much it turns me on when you obey me so fucking well.”

I bit my lip hard enough I felt the wound he’d given me open back up, a coppery flavor bursting on my tongue.

And when he pushed a thick finger into my body and rubbed my clit harder, I came right there.

“That’s it. That’s my good girl.” His lips were by my ear, his breathing harsh, his words gruff. “That’s a good girl, isn’t that right, Amara?”

All I could do was nod and try not to let the pleasure have me crying out where all these people could hear. And when he thrust his finger in and out of my pussy, drawing out the orgasm, I bit my lip harder and moaned louder.

Just as the pleasure receded and I sucked in a sharp breath, I felt Nikolai drag his tongue up the side of my throat, then sink his teeth into the soft spot below my ear.

“The sounds you make when you come make me so fucking hard.”

He kissed my temple and pulled his hand out from between my legs. I sucked in a ragged breath, was panting as I wrapped my fingers around the stem of the wine glass so tightly I was surprised it didn’t crack under the hold.

As consciousness filtered back into me and my vision cleared, I noticed two patrons across the room staring at me with shock and disgust on their faces. But at that moment I couldn’t find it in me to care. And so I held their gazes and brought my glass to my lips and finished off the sweet liquid.

The older man and woman looked away sharply and I felt the corner of my lip curl up at the fact I scandalized them. It was then I heard Nikolai speaking low and in Russian. I glanced at him as I adjusted my dress back down my legs and straightened in my seat.

His hard and cruel expression had me sobering and I smoothed my fingers along the soft, expensive material of my dress.

He glanced down at its wristwatch, said something harshly in Russian again, and then disconnected the call and shoved the phone back in the pocket of his jacket. Then he just stared straight ahead, his jaw locked tight, a muscle flexing underneath his tanned skin.

“Is everything alright? “It was two heartbeats before he looked at me, but then he exhaled, as if getting rid of whatever turbulent emotion he had inside of him.

He gave a sharp nod.

“*Da*. My plans were to take you home and finish what we started here.”

My skin tingled and felt extra sensitize at his words. He was a ravenous beast. I remembered this afternoon, when he’d come home and made good on his promise of eating me out for lunch. And now he’d given me another explosive orgasm right here in public.

“My beautiful girl, I do plan on finishing what we started here, but we have to make a detour. A quick one.”

I nodded, not able to find my words.

The bill was paid, Akim shook Nikolai’s hand, and then my husband was helping me with my coat, kissing me on the crown of my head, and leading me out of the restaurant.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO

Amara

Yama wasn't like anything I expected when Nikolai told me we had to make a stop at one of the establishments he owned. He told me it was one of his fight clubs, not something I really understood, but as I stood at the entrance of Yama, I wasn't exactly sure where this "fight club" was taking place.

The interior of the restaurant, bar, or maybe this was gentleman's club certainly didn't scream illegal fighting. And I had to assume it was illegal given the nature of Nikolai's business ventures.

He slipped his hand along my back, curling his hand around my waist as he led us deeper into the establishment. There were leather couches and chairs aesthetically placed around the room, a roaring fireplace off to the left, and a long bar across from the front entrance. Bottles of clear and brown liquid lined the glass shelves, and the mirrored wall behind the liquor made it seem far larger than it was.

The men were dressed in suits, fat cigars between their lips, the scent of aged tobacco filling the air in a sweet, smoky scent. And the women were gorgeously dressed, with diamonds on their ears, jewels around their necks, and fat rings on their fingers. Although I could've taken them for customers, guests of the expensively dressed men, I watched them flit around the room like little butterflies going from the bar to the seated men and handing out drinks.

Some of them even sat on the gentleman's laps. And when I saw hands disappearing down waistbands or fondling evident erections, I knew what

this place was.

Some kind of escort service.

Nikolai led us through the room and down the hallway, lowly lit sconces on the walls, the carpet plush and soft underneath my heels. His fingers flexed on my hip when we stopped at one of the doors. A second later he opened it and I was ushered inside. It was nothing but a standard office, with a desk and a filing cabinet, a dark and distressed leather couch off to the side, and a coffee table in front of it.

“Nikolai?” He turned his head so he could look down at me, his hand still around my waist. He curled his fingers tighter and I felt like it was in reassurance. Maybe he could see the confusion written across my face. It certainly felt like it was there, a neon sign flashing that I knew nothing about the real world. Not really. Not where it really counted.

“I have something to take care of. It’ll be quick. I want you to stay in this office.”

I opened my mouth, not sure exactly what I was going to say. To protest? Agree easily? Before any words could come out he was lowering his head and brushing his lips across mine. Little shock waves of pleasure filled me at that gentle pressure. The kiss wasn’t dark or demanding like his other kisses had been. It was soft, gentle.

“You’re just going to leave me here?” I said and looked around the office again. I wasn't saying it because I needed someone to stay with me, but I was shocked he was giving me this freedom, so to speak. I’d never been left alone, never without a guard or chaperone. So I was a little… taken aback.

“Sweetheart,” he said that endearment so sweetly it poured over me like melted butter. “I trust you.”

My heart thundered. He didn't know me, not enough to trust me, but still, I felt pleasure at hearing him say that. And the tone of his voice told me he meant what he said.

“And,” he said and cupped my cheek gently. God, so gently. “I own this establishment. I own all the people in here, including the soldier at the end of the hall that’ll make sure no one fucks with you.”

God, his use of profanity to emphasize his points shouldn’t have made me wet. Yet here I was clenching my thighs together.

He stroked his thumb over my bottom lip, his focus trained on the act. And then he was leaving the office before I could even get my bearings. I

lifted my hand and touched my tingling lips as I watched him go out the door and take a left. I didn't know what propelled me to move forward, but I found myself at the entryway looking down the hall and watching him disappear through a doorway at the end.

I looked back into the room, then turned and walked around, touching the desk, running my fingers over the smooth leather of the couch. I stood in that room for five minutes before I once again found myself walking toward the entryway.

I glanced to the right, seeing a big, beefy man standing at the end of the hallway dead center, his legs spread apart, his arms crossed. His stance was intimidating, threatening. Then again his size alone would've done the job of making anyone cower back. And I was only looking at his back. I could imagine the hard scowl on his face. But he didn't look at me, just stayed immobile. Like stone.

And then I was taking a left out of the office and making my way across the soft carpeted hallway, and stopping right in front of the door I'd seen Nikolai go through. I should've listened to him, I knew that. I knew I should have stayed in that room and wait for him. But energy filled me, the dangerous kind, the kind that would probably get me killed.

I turned the handle and pushed it open. A set of descending stairs greeted me, and industrial lighting lined either side of the stairwell.

I gripped the banister and walked down, the air becoming colder. I wasn't stupid to think I wouldn't be greeted with roadblocks of some kind. This wouldn't be as easy as I hoped, as it had been so far.

And that became clear when I reached the bottom step and rounded the corner to come to a stop in an anteroom made up of cement. There was an industrial sized light hanging from the ceiling, a metal cage protecting the bulb.

There was another door right in front of me, and a massive man standing in front of it, a jagged scar across his cheek. He, too, had the same stance as the man upstairs. Legs braced apart. Arms crossed over his chest. Hs nasty expression was directed right at me.

The smart thing would have been to just turn around and go back upstairs. Nikolai didn't have to know I was here; didn't have to know I'd disobeyed his direct orders.

But I didn't do any of that, because either way I knew someone would tell him.

I found myself taking a step closer, morbidly needing to know what was behind that door. My stupid curiosity was having me do things I never would've done before, never even contemplated.

If Nikolai wanted a woman who could stand beside him and watch the ruins of his destruction, then I needed to start being that woman.

He told me he wanted a wife who was strong, a queen to stand beside him. So here I was, doing just that even though I didn't know what the consequences would be and was scared as hell because I knew I probably didn't want to know what was behind that door.

I was about to open my mouth, not sure what I was going to say, maybe tell him I was Nikolai's wife as some kind of flex, but before I could say anything the guard was stepping aside, reaching behind him without taking his focus off of me, and turning the knob to push the door open.

Well. Okay then.

I was greeted with another chamber. Another door. Another guard. And it was the same process. He looked at me, as if he knew who I was, and I supposed maybe he did. Nikolai was high on the Bratva chain, a Pakhan, an heir. I had to assume something as big as news about him getting married, especially to the daughter of a member in the Cosa Nostra, would make its way around the rumor mill with his soldiers.

I could hear the steady *thump-thump* of music, maybe shouting coming from the closed door. And then it opened for me and the sound exploded outward to surround me. I stepped inside, and when my eyes adjusted, my breath caught in my throat.

The door shut behind me with a *clang*, and I was so startled I jumped and looked over my shoulder to stare at that red steel barricade that now caged me in with the chaos I willingly walked into.

I couldn't believe it had been so… easy.

No guards, no babysitter standing behind me. Just doors opening for me like I had…. power.

Petrov power.

I took a step forward, and another one, my heels getting stuck in the tiny slats of the metal flooring platform I was on. I stopped in front of a steel banister and took my shoes off, letting the straps hang off my fingertips as I looked down at the lower level, at the cage situated in the center.

Good God. What was I witnessing?

There were so many people it was mind blowing in its chaos. The shouting was earsplitting, with the need for violence, more blood… even death swirling in the air until you could taste it on your tongue, until it hit the back of your throat and made you gag.

They kept chanting one thing over and over again.

Razoreniye.

I was halfway down the steps before I realized I moved. I was focused on the wave of people moving back-and-forth, arms up in the air, hand curled into fists as they pumped the air, shouting for *Razoreniye*.

Razoreniye. Razoreniye. Razoreniye.

When I got to the bottom of the stairs I only had a few feet in front of me before the crush of bodies would swallow me whole. And as much as I wanted to get closer to the cage, a dark and rested curiosity filling me, I also wasn’t foolish.

If I fell I’d get trampled on, nothing but debris under all those shoes.

With each passing second I could hear the shouts growing louder. I could feel the energy rising in the cavernous room. God, this place was huge. All exposed rock walls as if they’d been dug out and just left to their own natural severity. The flooring was standard gray cement, the ceiling a highway of red beams, wires, and caged fluorescent lighting.

And then there was the cage, a massive structure that seemed to dominate the space. I rose on my toes to see if I could get a better look. I caught glimpses of rusty colored smears on what was probably a once white cage mat.

Razoreniye. Razoreniye. Razoreniye.

The name was shouted over and over again, ringing in my ears.

Whatever was going to happen was going to happen soon

Whoever—whatever—they were shouting for was about to make itself known.

I kept to the farthest back wall, but my focus was on the cage. And with each passing second the crowd seemed to get even more frantic, as if whatever was about to happen was what they’d come here for.

I was at the corner of the room when I stopped, rising up on my toes and getting a good vantage point of the cage. An announcer started saying something overhead but the crowd wouldn't be quiet enough for me to understand or hear clearly. And then a second later the crowd erupted in

shouts and roars, and I swear the entire interior of the room was shaking, the walls threatening to crumble from the force itself

I couldn't see anything, not with as many people as there were, not with how short I was. I contemplated moving further up when I saw the top of a dark head, and broad, bare tattooed shoulders.

The crowd calmed slightly when the announcer started speaking again, when the beast of the man climbed into the ring.

"The one. The fucking only. *Razoreniye* is in the motherfucking ring to destroyyy."

Skull splitting noise so that I had to cover my ears.

"I know we have some newbies in the crowd tonight. Get ready, you sick bastards, to watch the man they call Ruin, a Russian killing machine who is a certified sociopath."

The crowd erupted in excitement after that.

And then I saw him, a hulking beast of a man who made Nikolai seem almost… soft in comparison. And it was because as I looked into his face I saw absolute nothing.

Nothing but focus, concentration, and a very clear need for the ruin his namesake was derived from.

The entire front of his chest was covered by a massive wolf's head, a snarling beast with death in its eyes and blood on his snout. His body was covered with Bratva insignia tattooed on his scarred, tanned flesh.

I was frozen in place as I watched his opponent enter the cage, a man not nearly as tall or muscular, but still beefy, his hands like anvils, his bald head covered in swirling ink.

I didn't know how long I stood there after they started fighting, but as blood and spittle painted the mat, as punches were thrown, flesh bitten out, cracks of bones being broken, and screams and roars of pain and violence, I knew I'd made a mistake.

A terrible mistake. I should have listened to Nikolai. I shouldn't have come here, shouldn't have inserted myself where I didn't belong.

I was backing up, one hand held out behind me until I touched the cold wall. I curled my fingers around the straps of my shoes in my other hand, tightening them so hard around the delicate leather my knuckles ached.

I didn't take my focus off the cage until I'd moved ten feet or so, not relying I'd walked so far into this underground coffin. And that's what this place was. A home for death.

I was about to turn and run back up to the main level and barricade myself in the office. But when I spotted Nikolai standing off to the side of the cage, his dark head bent low as someone said something in his ear, a thick yellow envelope being passed to him, I was once again rooted to the spot.

Although Nikolai stood still, a scowl on his face, not doing anything threatening, he exuded power and strength, dominance and severity in whoever went up against him.

The crowd roared and I snapped my focus to the cage, saw *Razoreniye* tackle the other fighter to the ground and start throwing his fist against the side of his head. Blood sprayed everywhere, and when I glanced back at Nikolai, I watched as he stared at the cage, a splatter of blood on his cheek.

He ran a finger over that blood , a slow grin covering his face as if he got off on the violence. I clenched my thighs again as a wave of heat slammed into me.

And then it's over, the fight finished, *Razoreniye* climbing off his unmoving opponent, his chest pumping up and down, sweat and blood dripping off his body. And I didn't think the latter was his. Not a drop.

Razoreniye walked to the edge of the cage and curled his hands around the fencing, his biceps flexing as he strained against it. Nikolai stepped forward and I could see his mouth moving, see the other man nod once. I found myself taking a step forward, some unseen force pulling me toward my husband.

But before I could move, a heavy arm wrapped itself around my waist and yanked me back so hard my head snapped back on my neck, my shoes fell from my fingertips, and I cried out in pain.

I instinctively reached for the arm, clawing at it, trying to get it off of me, but the grip was like iron, vice-like. And the harder I fought, the more I was dragged away into darker parts.

A grunt sounded when I raked my nails down the forearm, a low laugh as I was pulled deeper into the shadows.

A string of gruff Russian words were said behind me, followed by a response from a second man I hadn't known was there. More laughing, more pulling me further from the crowd until I was tossed aside and fell to my knees.

Another harsh cry left me as my palms and knees connected with the unforgiving cement. They started laughing and speaking in Russian again,

and I quickly pulled myself off the ground and faced them, keeping them both in my line of sight.

They'd pulled me into some alcove. I could see the lights from the main room pouring into the opening. I could hear the shouts and roars from the crowd, but they blocked the entrance, and trying to move past them wasn't going to be successful.

"You're making a mistake," I said with more conviction than I thought I could muster. I opened my mouth to tell them Nikolai was my husband, using my husband's status and power to put the fear of god—and the Bratva—in them.

But before I could utter another word one of them came at me, hand wrapped around my throat, and used his strength to push me back against the wall.

He said something low and deep and no doubt disgusting. When he leaned in closer I turned my head and started fighting him again.

I managed to lift my leg and knee him in the groin, and was satisfied when a grunt of pain left him. He growled something nasty abasing the side of my face, and I braced for the hit that would surely come, but a rough grunt and groan in the corridor had both of us tensing.

I heard something hit the ground, a meaty, wet sound following. And then the man who held me abasing the wall was off of me and the motion was so sudden I sagged.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust, but then I saw a massive body standing five feet from me. I felt his gaze on me, this beast.

Razoreniye.

I could smell the sweat and blood that clung to him, and heard it dripping onto the floor.

A heartbeat passed of us staring at each other before he took a step closer. I pressed my back to the wall, about to scream, when he bent and picked up the man who'd been pulled off me.

Razoreniye had a huge hand wrapped around his neck, and the entire time he stared at me, I knew he was squeezing hard and harder.

He let the body fall to the ground and I thought he'd killed the man, but when he groaned and tried to rise, I snapped my focus back to the one they called Ruin.

He stepped aside just as another body moved closer.

Nikolai.

Nikolai stepped into the corner, his hands in his pockets as he looked at me and then at the man who was still groaning on the ground. He stopped when he stood right beside the wounded asshole.

Nikolai stared down at him for so long I didn't think he'd ever speak, but then he murmured low and deadly, "you thought you could touch my wife?" There was this deceptive calm in his tone that was more frightening than anything else right now.

My fearsome husband looked at me then, his gaze lingering on my neck where the man had grabbed me. It throbbed and stung, and I knew it was red, and would possibly be marked come morning.

"I didn't know she was yours—" The man said in English, responding to Nikolai.

"—You didn't know she was mine?" Nikolai cut him off and produced a knife from his pocket, the blade catching the filtering light from the main part of the room for just a second. "You didn't know she was mine," he said again, low, his voice even, as if he was asking the question in a conversational manner.

The man pulled himself off the ground finally and stumbled backward until he had nowhere to go. A beast at his side, a wall behind him, and my husband stalking him from the front.

"You touched her." Nikolai stopped and looked down at his knife, smoothed a finger over the blade. "And for every mark you left on her body, I'm going to cut into you, take a piece from you."

And that was the only warning Nikolai gave. He had his hand in the man's hair, yanked his head back, and proceeded to take chunks out of him, bits of flesh he tossed to the ground so they made a disgusting wet slopping noise as they hit the cement.

The man screamed, begged, pleaded and cried. But his sobs couldn't be heard over the roaring coming from the crowd. But I had a feeling he wouldn't have gotten help anyway, not when Nikolai was calling the shots.

I didn't know how long this went on, but long enough that I tasted blood in the air, a coppery flavor that coated my throat and had me gagging.

And when the man was a ruined, barely breathing mess on the ground, as his blood pooled around him and snaked its way toward me, I watched in stunned–sick–fascination as Nikolai grabbed one of the man's hands and started cutting off the pads of his fingers.

He did this to all ten digits, the man giving one last gurgled sound as his throat was cut open, his eyes staring up at nothing.

Nikolai wiped his blade on the other guy's jacket, pocketed it, and faced me. I was so stunned by what I'd just witnessed I felt like I was swimming underwater, unable to breath, my body feeling almost detached.

He didn't move for long seconds, just watched me. Without breaking eye contact, he said something to the mountain of a man behind him, and a second later we were alone. But that only lasted for a few minutes and then two men were coming and dragging the two bodies away.

I covered my mouth with my hand as I watched the dark, inky looking blood trail behind them.

"*Printsessa*," Nikolai said and there was this weird note in his voice.

When I looked back at him, I also took note that his expression was off. He was hiding something. Masking how he really felt. But I was too shocked by what happened to see too deeply into it.

And so I let him wrap his arm around my shoulders, felt him kiss the top of my head, and let him lead me out of that underground illegal fighting room, up the stairs, out the doors, and back into the hallway of the main establishment.

It was then when the noise rushed back into me. The sound of women giggling, glasses clinking filled my head. I blinked several times, the world settling itself around me. It was as if what I'd just witnessed happened to someone else. Elegance and lavishness surrounded me from top to bottom. Gone was the scent and taste of blood in the air, of the violence and shouting filling my head.

How did nobody hear what was going on downstairs? How did nobody know what was happening in the underbelly of this place?

The man who was initially guarding the front of the hallway glanced over his shoulder and lowered his brows. He looked between the two of us, then faced us and held his hands out. He started speaking quickly in Russian to Nikolai, and the entire time Nikolai held his arm around me, keeping me close to his side.

"Give me a minute," he said and before I could question him, he had his hand curled under my chin and tipping my head back so he could press his mouth to mine.

He slid his other hand up the length of my spine and cupped the back of my head, curling his fingers against my scalp, tangling his fingers in the

strands. He kissed me long, slow and deep and everything else faded away.

My fear, the anxiety and the shock of what I witnessed all melted away under the onslaught of his mouth devouring mine. He was slow as he pulled his mouth back, languished as he dragged his tongue over my top and bottom lip. He dragged his tongue over my lips again, an act, I realized, he did every time after we kissed, as if he were marking me.

He pulled back fully and looked down at me, that strange expression still on his face. And then he was striding up to the guard that stood several feet away. I brought my hand up to my mouth and touched my tingling lips, my body light, my pussy liquid. A shocked cry left me when out of nowhere Nikolai slammed his fist into the side into the man's jaw.

The sound of something cracking filled the short hallway and I stumbled back, feeling my eyes widen as I watched Nikolai continue to slam his fist into the other man's face over and over again.

"Stop." My voice was threadbare. "Nikolai. For God's sake stop." I was shouting now, tears streaming down my cheeks. He turned and faced me, his chest rising and falling, a cold, hard and dead look in his eyes.

"He didn't protect you," he said matter-of-factly. "He had one fucking job to do and he didn't fucking do it."

I was shaking my head before he finished. "It's not his fault. It's not his fault." I felt like I kept saying those words over and over again. "You don't have to do this. You don't." I had my hands out, palms facing forward, moving slowly toward him. I didn't know why I thought doing so was a good idea, with the blood and gore covering him, the cruel look on his face.

But the closer I got, the lower his brows went, as if he were confused I was coming closer, as if he didn't understand why I would risk being so near to a feral creature.

I didn't know the kind of upbringing Nikolai or his brother had, but I could imagine. Being a male in the Cosa Nostra meant you were brought up to be ruthless, with little love and an iron fist always in your face.

I could imagine it was the same with the Bratva. I could picture a small Nikolai as a child, his dark hair tousled, his blue eyes looking in horror as his father made him do unspeakable things. I could picture his innocence being stripped away, bit by bit, layer by layer until he'd been shaped and molded into the man who stood before me right now.

Beating the hell out of someone for the simple infraction of not seeing that I snuck away.

“It’s my fault. Not his. You don’t have to do this.” I kept my voice soft and low and reached up and cupped either side of his face. I could feel the scruff underneath my palms, and heard his breathing start to slow down as the seconds ticked by.

I didn’t dare look at the man he’d just attacked, but I could hear him moving, the groans and grunts as he pulled himself off the ground and stood. Without looking at him I said in a steady, even voice, “you need to go. You need to leave me and my husband alone.” Nikolai growled and I clicked my tongue. “Hey, you just focus on me. He’s no one, okay? He’s no one.”

Thankfully he didn’t question, didn’t speak. He kept his movement slow and steady, probably realizing Nikolai was right there at the precipice of breaking down once more, using violence to get his point across because that’s all he knew, all he’d ever been taught.

“It’s okay. I’m okay.” I smoothed my fingers over his cheekbones and added a little pressure to bring his head down toward me so I could brush my lips across his.

He had splatters of blood on his neck and on the white collar of his button down shirt. But I didn’t care. Talking him down from the proverbial ledge was my only focus.

Despite knowing I should’ve been terrified of him, fearful he’d use that power against me, I knew he wouldn’t hurt a hair on my head.

“Take me home,” I whispered again, and he sighed, as if he were releasing the pent-up aggression that kept him caged. I knew a man like Nikolai—the things he’d seen and done through his whole life—couldn’t be “healed”.

And I didn’t want to change him.

I just didn’t want the darkness to swallow him whole.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-THREE

Amara

I could feel the wild energy pouring off of Nikolai. Although I thought I'd talked him down back at Yama, it wasn't until we'd gotten back to the apartment that I realized he was an expert at masking what he felt

Maybe he had calmed down slightly, enough to not kill that man, which was where he'd been headed. So there was that. But now I was alone with him. Right now I felt like the sacrificial lamb and he was the lion, pacing his cage as he waited to take me down.

As soon as we'd stepped through the door and it clicked shut behind us, Nikolai had made his way to the bar. Sasha had seemed to sense his volatile temper also, as she eyed him, then padded over to me to bump her nose against my leg before making her way down the hall and out of sight.

I stood there for a moment just staring at him, seeing how tense his shoulders were, the flex of his muscles underneath his jacket.

I hadn't said anything, worried that stopping him from taking out his aggression on that soldier hadn't been the right move. But what was I supposed to do? Stand there and watch him kill somebody with his fists?

I couldn't live with that, and was surprised I was handling everything that happened tonight as it was. So I'd silently excuse myself to the bedroom, knowing we both probably needed to be alone.

And that's where I was now, standing in front of the window and staring out at the city that was now my home. My reality. For a split second I felt a twinge of homesickness. It wasn't for my father, not really for my mother in the sense that I missed her loving embraces and her soft words

But I missed my sister and brother, when I did see him. I missed the routine I had, all the things that were familiar to me. Small items that I'd taken had helped me feel slightly more at ease, but everything had changed in such a short amount of time that it was hard to grasp my footing.

I felt like I was on a slab of ice running but not making any headway, not putting any distance between me and the life that I'd had.

With a sigh of defeat, or maybe of acceptance that I had no other choice but to grab the proverbial horns and hang on, I reached behind for the zipper of the dress. I struggled for a few seconds, but then I felt a heavy presence behind me, body heat spearing into the skin that was exposed. It was my turn to tense, not sure how Nikolai would react, not sure what he would do.

Would he finally show me his true side? Would he be just like my father and take out his aggression on me with fists and cruel words?

And even though in my heart I didn't feel like he was like that, would never harm me, I was braced for it, knowing I could fight all I wanted but he was bigger, stronger. I closed my eyes when I felt him gently brush my hand away from the zipper, his fingertips sliding along the dip in the back of my gown.

A moment later he was pulling the zipper down, the sound of the teeth unhooking seeming overly loud in the quiet room. I felt his knuckles graze the length of my spine as he kept pulling it down.

"You're trembling, *kukolka*."

When the zipper was undone I didn't move. The straps hung loosely over my shoulders, and I pressed my hand to the center of my chest to keep the dress on my body.

"Are you afraid of me?" I felt like his voice was deceptively calm given the violent energy surrounding him. I didn't speak right away, just continued to stare out at Desolation, feeling the gentle brush of his finger up and down the length of my spine.

"I'm not afraid of you," I finally said. "But I am afraid of the power and violence you have at your fingertips, how you can destroy lives as easily as taking a breath."

I felt like it had been beaten into me since I was old enough to walk that the men in my life held life and death in their hands.

Nikolai was no different, but even in the short amount of time we'd been together he never hurt me, never so much as said a cruel word or gave

me a hard look.

“I’d never hurt you.” His voice was still soft… but sharp like the edge of a blade. “I’d never raise my hand at you in anger.”

Up and down. Up and down. His touch on the center of my back was slow. Thorough.

I turned and faced him, his hand sliding from my body to rest on my hip. I stared into his eyes, his pupils spreading out and eating up the blue, looking as dark as the night upon us, as dark as what swirled around him.

He was trying so hard to stay in control, the adrenaline still pumping through his veins from what had happened tonight. I could see it, sense it. *Feel it.*

“You know,” he said in an even tone as he dipped his gaze down to my mouth.

I wet my lips, his intense stare having my entire body tingle. Nikolai was like an exposed electrical wire, and getting too close to him had the hairs on my arms standing on end.

It had danger flashing in me, like big bold letters, my mind telling me not to touch, not to get too close because I would get hurt.

Yet here I was, wanting that pain… but only by him.

“The only reason I didn’t kill Yuri for not watching you properly was because I didn’t want you to see me kill another man.”

He lifted his hand and at first when he smoothed his thumb over my bottom lip the touch was gentle. But when he did it again he added pressure, making it hurt, pressing my flesh against my teeth.

“It’s easy to hide insanity, but it’s more fun to let that mask slip.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant by that, but before I could question him, faster than I could anticipate, he curled his hand around my throat and used pressure to walk me back until the window stopped us.

For long moments he did nothing but keep that palm and finger collar around my throat, his gaze locked on me, heartbeats filling the space between us. He leaned his head forward, his mouth brushing along the curve of my jaw until I could feel his warm breath teasing my ear.

“I don’t think you understand how much control I’m exerting right now for you.” As if to emphasize his point, he squeezed my neck.

Instinctively I lifted my hand and curled my fingers around his thick, tattooed wrist, but I didn’t do it to push him away, to fight him. I did it to keep him right where he was.

“I can’t think straight right now.” His words rumbled against my ear and he pressed his lower body against mine. I felt the hard outline of his erection digging into my belly. “I feel destructive, all that energy and anger I couldn’t get out, couldn’t finish off on that piece of shit who couldn’t keep you safe.”

He rolled his hips, circling them against me, pressing his hardness against my softness. I let out a little sound, one that was a plea, a desperate noise.

“I’m going to fuck you for the first time tonight, so hard that you’ll still feel me next week.” His words were matter of fact and I whimpered. “It’s going to be hard and rough. I’m not going to be gentle. I’m going to ruin you, ruin you for anyone else, Amara. Do you understand that? Are you ready for that?”

I opened my mouth but a cry left me instead of actual words. How did I convey that he terrified me, that he aroused me, that he awoke something in me that I never knew I had? It was a dormant darkness, this tendril of inky smoke that wound around my arousal and tempted me with corruption.

His name was a breathy moan from me, and when he bit down on my earlobe I cried out, that pain mixing with my pleasure and causing my inner muscles to tighten up.

Before I knew it was happening, he spun me around and pressed my body to the glass. He was rough and harsh as he jerked my dress down my body, material tearing, the sound of fabric rendering filling my dazed mind and heightening the ecstasy that I was slowly drowning in.

He inserted his booted foot between mine, kicked my legs further apart until I became unsteady and had to brace my palms on the window. My breathing was frantic, fogging up the glass, clouding the visage of his reflection.

“Mmm, this ass is perfect, firm in the right places, but plump enough I’m going to sink my teeth in and bite hard enough you cry for me.” His hands were on the cheeks, his fingers digging into the flesh.

I looked over my shoulder and watched him sink down to his haunches, curling his fingers harder into my ass, his big, tattooed paws dwarfing the twin mounds. I held my breath, not sure what his plans were, but when he spread the cheeks and I felt cool air brush along that hidden part of me, a soft whimper left me.

“I’m not going to be destroying *this* hole tonight, baby girl. I’ll save that for after I’ve broken in your virgin cunt.”

Oh God, his words were so filthy.

He slid his hands over my ass to grip my hips and jerked me backward so my breasts were pressed to the cold glass, my lower half popped out and my legs spread even more.

I knew what he planned before I felt his hands smooth back down to curl around my cheeks, spreading them open once more. I felt his mouth latch onto my soaking pussy and cried out at the shocking intensity of that feeling.

I should have been ashamed by the sound I made, that little *umpf* of shock and pleasure as he ate me out, licking and nipping, lapping up my juices and fucking me with his tongue.

The grunts and groans he made as he ate out my pussy was wet, the sound of him sucking at me so loud that I rested my forehead on the window, my breathing harsh, the humidity from my panting causing my face to feel humid, the glass to fog.

He put his entire mouth over my pussy at the same time he brought his palm down on one of my ass cheeks, the smacking sound filling the room. He groaned when I popped my ass out more, shamelessly grinding myself against his mouth.

I was so close, his lips latched around my clit, the sucking motion almost bringing me over the edge. He brought his palm down on my ass once more, the sting instant, the pain having me rise up on my toes, trying to get away yet not wanting to because I needed his mouth to stay on me.

Right before I fell over the edge, he was off of me, spinning me around so quickly I gasped, the world spinning for just a second. He had his hand wrapped around my throat, his other snaked down the center of my back. And when he curled a palm around my bottom once more, I gave him the moan I knew he wanted.

“I wish I could say I want to give you sweet and gentle for your first time.” His words were nothing but a husky growl against my ear, his fingers flexing around the column of my throat. “But I’d be lying. I want it rough. I want it to hurt. I want you to *feel* me.”

He gave my ass one more smack and squeeze before moving his hand between our bodies. I heard his zipper being pulled down and then he was rubbing the pre-cum slickened tip of his cock against my belly.

“I’m going to destroy your pussy tonight so you’ll know you’re mine.”

He pressed his lips to mine, not kissing me, just holding still, as he continued to rub his cum soaked cock tip along my belly. I felt like this was a primal act, marking me in a very visceral way. And then he bit my bottom lip hard enough I cried out. He soothed the sting by licking at my lips and then plunging his tongue inside.

I felt like a kitten as I sucked on his tongue, making the most embarrassing noises imaginable.

He slid one hand over my ass, down my thigh, and curled his fingers against the back of my knee. When he lifted my leg I instantly hooked it around his waist, knowing where this was going, desperate for it to happen.

Although it had only been a few days since the wedding, I felt like I’d been waiting an eternity for us to consummate the marriage, for me to fully be Nikolai‘s in every single way. I knew he needed this just as much as I did. I could feel the tenseness in his body, the way his hand shook, the forcefulness of his kiss as he devoured my mouth.

He broke the kiss and dragged his tongue over my cheek and down my neck, biting his way, snarling and growling like he was a feral animal. But then again I’d always felt that primal power simmering underneath his skin, waiting to explode. And I was going to experience it firsthand. I was going to absorb it all and ask for more.

So when I felt him place the tip of his cock at the entrance of my pussy I didn’t tense even though I wanted to desperately. His cock was big, so big that I knew it would hurt when he was inside of me. He’d split me in two, fill me up so much the pain would be unbearable.

“I’d say I’m sorry it’s going to hurt, but I’m not.” He moved his hand down the curve of my shoulder, his fingers moving away from my throat and over my jaw, his thumb being shoved into my mouth. I sucked on that digit for only a second, and in one fluid move he thrust up and into me so hard, so forcefully that I sunk my teeth into his thumb, realizing that’s why he put his finger in my mouth.

My cry was muffled, the tears spilling out the corners of my eyes, the burning, the stinging pain, the fullness and stretch unlike anything I could’ve ever imagined. He grunted as he buried himself fully as he kept pushing inch after inch into me. God, it was never ending.

“Just a little bit more and you’ll have taken me all. What a good girl, look at you stretching for me, taking all my cock.” He pushed in another

inch. “I bet you feel like you’re splitting in two, don’t you?”

I couldn’t answer, couldn’t even form a coherent word

“Look at you being my little whore and taking it all, giving me those tears I desperately want.”

I was sobbing now, my hands curled around his shoulders, nails digging into the material of his shirt. I wanted him to be just as naked as I was. I felt as if I were on a ledge, bared to him as he stood there still fully dressed, his cock pulled out the fly of his slacks, my back sliding up and down the glass as he pushed more and more and more of himself into my body.

He grunted and buried his face in the crook of my neck, biting me over and over. My throat. My collarbone. The underside of my jaw. He dragged his tongue over my cheeks, licking up my tears, kissing the corners of my eyes.

I was lost in the sensation as he stilled, every inch of his hardness now embedded in me, his balls pressed against the curve of my ass. My inner muscles clenched from the penetration, from the stinging fullness, the breath stalling intensity of my virginity being ripped away from me.

Nikolai was savage as he started fucking me, thrusting his hips back and forth, pistoning his huge cock in me so all I could do was hold on and take what he gave.

He was groaning words in Russian, speaking a fast string of the foreign language against the side of my neck between biting me. The pain was all-consuming, my wetness and no doubt virgin blood making his cock slippery and slick as he continued to fuck me.

He’d already ruined me, taken my innocence and locked it away so only he had the key.

“Look at you,” he groaned, then followed it with harsh Russian words. “Taking it all, being my good little slut.”

God, his words should have offended me, hurt me, but I found myself growing wetter, my inner muscles clenching around his girth. He grunted and picked up his speed at the same time he moved his hand between us and rubbed my clit.

I squeezed my eyes shut and made a long, embarrassing moan as pleasure sparked in me even more.

“You feel so good, your cunt so perfect. You’re going to come for me, aren’t you? Yeah, you’re going to come and soak my cock.”

He rubbed my clit harder, faster. Every part of me was winding up for an explosive orgasm. “That’s my girl. You like that, baby? You like my cock in your pussy and my thumb on your clit.”

I couldn’t speak. I could only make keening noises of ecstasy and pain.

“There is nobody better than you, nobody that could ever please me like you can.”

And it was that praise, the pain, the embarrassment of how sloppy our sex sounded, that I came, my body seizing, my pussy clamping down hard.

He said something in Russian, his voice guttural as he quickened his pace. “Fuck, baby girl. I can feel you squeezing me. Oh fuck you’re so good, so tight and hot, so damn wet. I’m coming.” He curled both hands fully around my ass and really started pushing into me and pulling out, his fingers painful on my body, his mouth on the side of my throat as he continued to suck and bite.

I came again and lost all feeling in my arms and legs from the pleasure. He held me up, though, keeping me impaled on his dick as his cock thickened a second before he spilled inside of me and filled me with his hot, thick cum. He was so hard, so big that I felt dainty in his arms.

“My little doll,” he murmured, his breath hot and fast as he panted against my throat.

He wrapped his arms around me and lifted me off the ground. I instantly wrapped my legs around his waist, my arms more firmly around his shoulders. His cock was still deep within me, my face buried in the crook of his neck now as he turned for the window and carried us to the bed.

He gently laid me down, and when he pulled out of me I gasped, feeling his cum start to sip out of my body. I closed my legs but Nikolai growled and curled his big paws around my knees, jerking my thighs open so he could watch as his seed trickled out of me.

“Look at you, so dirty. My filthy fucking beautiful girl, making a wet spot on the bed as my cum slides from that tight cunt and down the crease of that perfect ass. You’ll let me watch, let me degrade you again. I know this fucking embarrasses you, doesn’t it, baby?” He looked at me briefly. “Look at how dilated your pupils are, how much your breathing has picked up. You shy to let your husband see how swollen and wet your cunt his after fucking it?”

I bit my lip and moaned, my hips moving slightly. I was humiliated that he was watching his cum spill for my body. It was so… obscene.

He lowered his gaze back down between my thighs. “You filthy fucking beautiful girl,” he whispered and I gasped when I felt even more of *him* come out of me. His nostrils flared, a low rumble left him, and then he let go of my knees and started undressing.

I didn’t bother closing my legs, leaving them wide and open, knowing that’s what he wanted. I was transfixed at seeing him fully naked, at the prowess that was… *him*, at all his tattoos, the lean muscle, his semi-hard cock that was still huge and intimidating. Although his cock was glossy, covered in his orgasm and mine, streaked with what could only be from my broken hymen, he didn’t bother cleaning up.

And I didn’t want him to. I just wanted to feel him, wanted a softer side of him to comfort me right now.

When he was in bed with me, Nikolai covered us with the comforter, pulled me in close, and just held me. I didn’t care that I was sore and sticky between my thighs, didn’t care that I still felt his cum slipping from my pussy.

I closed my eyes, rested a hand on his warm chest, and listened to him speak to me in a low, deep voice, his Russian words beautiful, lulling me to sleep.

“Sleep, *krasavitsa*. I’ll keep you safe.”

And I knew he would. With his life.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-FOUR

Amara

Because I knew how to work the coffee machine, my cup this morning didn't taste like ass, and I didn't have to put as much cream and sugar in it. I'd woken up pretty early, before the sun had even risen, and saw Nikolai was already gone.

The sheets beside me had been cold, telling me he hadn't slept beside me for quite some time. I tried to call him but it had gone straight to voicemail. Although I knew he left early for work, I couldn't help but have this strange feeling in the pit of my stomach.

When I'd come downstairs I saw a note tacked to the refrigerator, informing me someone named Arseny had taken Sasha for the day. I admitted the house felt lonelier, empty without her here, and although she kept to herself, a silent companion, she was still the latter nonetheless.

I was now curled up on the leather couch, my coffee mug in one hand, my cell phone in the other as I dialed Claudia's number. I shifted where I sat and hissed out as the soreness between my thighs was intense. Then it had me blushing because that pain felt… good.

It had been a couple of days since I talked to her, but she'd been on my mind the entire time. My worry for her was not something I could get used to or push to the back burner.

I pressed the phone to my ear and listened to it ring as I brought my coffee mug up to my mouth and took a long drink. I stared at the splattering of clouds in the distance, an almost hazy fog over Desolation making it seem even more depressing.

True, I hadn’t done any “sightseeing” of the new city I called home, but I was pretty sure Nikolai wouldn’t want me to go walking around the city anyway. Maybe he’d take me out of the city frequently. Maybe I could make this work and not feel like I was living some stranger’s life.

“Hello?” I sat up straighter and focused my attention on the phone call. Claudia sounded groggy, as if I just woke her up. And although it was going on lunchtime, she’d always been a heavy sleeper and late riser.

I cleared my throat and said, “hey.” I heard some rustling on the other end, and could picture her lifting a hand and rubbing her eyes.

“Amara? It’s so early.”

I chuckled. “It’s going on noon.”

She groaned.

“How are you? I feel like it’s been forever since we talked or saw each other.” I was being ridiculous seeing as I’d just seen her a few days ago, but we’d never been apart this long

“Fine, I guess.” She yawned and I couldn’t help but smile.

Even though she was fifteen and starting to become more of a woman, she was still and always would be my little sister.

“How’s mom? Gio?” I didn’t ask our her father was because I was sure he was the same as he was just days before. An aggressive bastard who didn’t care about his family or if they were happy. I heard Claudia groan softly then more shuffling.

“Mother is fine,” she finally said. “Gio left the day you came over, after your wedding.” I could hear her moving around, then a moment later the sound of water running on came through.

“Gio’s gone? Where did he go?” My body was tense when I heard that. Gio said he would watch over her, but if he wasn’t there the only explanation was father had sent him away. “Did father send him away?”

“I don’t know. I just heard him and father arguing. And then that afternoon he was leaving with a bag packed slung over his shoulder. He told me he’d come back as soon as he could. He kissed me on the top of the head, and that was that.”

I set my coffee down and thought about her words, my dread turning to anger.

This wasn’t a coincidence. My father had sent our brother away because he knew Gio would stand in his way of treating Claudia like shit, taking his frustration and anger out on her. Of breaking her down so she was pliable.

“Father can be unbearable.” She finally said and after a second I could hear the phone click on to the speakerphone, the sound amplified, almost echoed. There was more splashing of water, then the faucet was turned off.

“I don’t know what you and him talked about that day you came over after your wedding, but he’s been on a rampage.” A long moment passed before she replied and then I heard a soft sigh come from her

“What? What’s wrong?” When she didn’t respond right away I was about to push her again.

“It’s nothing. Really.” Claudia was an awful liar, but given the topic at hand my mind jumped to the worst case scenario.

“Are you alone right now?” I had to assume she was in her room but I wanted to make sure.

“Yeah. Why?”

I cleared my throat and said, “did father hit you? Has he hurt you?” She didn’t respond for a solid few seconds and I knew what her answer was going to be before she spoke. “Claudia.” I kept my voice soft and low, gentle.

She wasn’t a stranger to our father’s temper, had been struck by him in the past for disobedience. But I’d always been there to help deflect his anger, to take it on myself.

But I knew if she got struck in the last couple of days it had nothing to do with her acting out and everything to do with me. Which had more guilt and shame filling me, and even more resolve that as soon as I talked to Nikolai again I was demanding we get my sister out of there.

At this point I didn’t care if it started a war. I wanted my baby sister out of that house.

“Listen, this isn’t something that you have to worry about, not something I want you to even think about. You’re married now. You should be having an incredible honeymoon somewhere tropical and working on getting me a niece or nephew?”

Her voice was light, but it was forced. I knew Claudia well enough to know that the tightness I heard was because she was trying to put on a brave face, trying to make it so I wasn’t worried about her. Did she know I’d always want to protect her?

“Let’s not get crazy with a niece and nephew talk this early.” She laughed softly and it was genuine, music to my ears at that moment. “Listen,” I said softly and stood, walking up to the window and curling my

free hand around the edge of my shirt. “I’m going to talk to Nikolai about having you come visit us.”

She started to talk but I cut her off, needing to get this out.

“I think it would do you some good to come here. That’s what father and I were talking about the day after the wedding. I wanted you to come stay with us, to keep me company. He obviously didn’t like that idea.” I squeezed my eyes shut and breathed out slowly. “It’s not going to be easy. But I’m not going to stop until he gives in, and I know Nikolai is in my corner, yours too.” Although he never said as such, I knew he’d help me, knew he’d help Claudia because she was my family. Now his.

“It’s fine,” she whispered but I could hear the tightness in her voice, and knew she was about to cry. “Things are just tense right now. Once everything from the wedding settles down everything will be fine.”

Even I heard the underline question in her tone. She and I both knew things weren’t going to get better. They weren’t before I left, and they certainly wouldn’t know that I was gone. She didn’t have a buffer between his anger, not with me away and Gio now coincidentally being sent away.

“Listen, you just hang in there and I’m going to talk to Nikolai. We’re going to figure something out. Even if at first you can only come for a short time, a small visit, we’re going to make it happen. Okay?”

I was on the verge of tears myself, picturing my sister dealing with all of this. She was so young, but had grown up so fast. Far too fast. If I didn’t get her out of there, the next three years until she was pawned off to a man of my father’s choosing would wear her down until she was nothing but a shell of a woman.

That or she’d destroy herself and her wild ways, getting back at our father any route she could.

“It hasn’t been all that bad,” she finally said on an exhale. “Francesca’s actually been coming over and keeping me company.”

Somethings funny happened in my chest, my heart starting to beat faster, my belly clenching.

“Francesca?” I didn’t say anything more. They weren’t friends, never had been. “When did this start? It had to have been within the past few days, which seemed suspect as hell, but I kept that part to myself.

“At the reception, actually. I was sitting at the table alone as father and mother danced. I didn’t know where you had gone. I saw her walk into the

ballroom and she looked so upset. So I tried to talk to her, to make her feel better.

I smiled to myself because Claudia was so good at heart. She might be a spitfire and have the stereotypical temperament of a feisty Italian woman, but she had the kindest heart of anybody I knew.

“So of course I started talking to her, asking her if everything was okay. She told me how she had some personal things going on, family problems. And the rest is history. We just kind of hit it off.”

I thought back to that night, what I had seen between her and Edoardo, how the “family problems” had nothing to do with why she was upset that night. But of course I didn’t say that.

“What have you two been doing?” I kept my voice conversational, but red flags were rising up in me, one after the other, my anxiety for Claudia increasing.

Claudia didn’t answer for a moment as I heard her brushing her teeth. The faucet turned on, she spit, the sound of her rinsing, and then she finally answered.

“Nothing really. She comes here and we just hang out in the library, or watch movies and eat junk food.”

“Sounds fun, like she’s keeping you busy.” I started worrying my bottom lip as I continued to stare out the window. “Does she talk about anything? Me?”

“You?” Confusion in her voice. “Why would we talk about you?”

“It just seems… weird she’s hanging around suddenly, no?”

Claudia didn’t answer right away, maybe thinking about it, or maybe angry with me. I didn’t want to make things awkward, or plant seeds of distrust in her mind, but surely she had to see how strange it was Francesca, three years older than her, all of the sudden showed an interest in hanging out. Not to mention this was no coincidence, not after what I’d seen her and Eduardo do, not after Nikolai had killed Francesca’s lover.

“Maybe, but right now I’m not going to complain about having someone hang out with me.” There was a sour tone in her voice and I knew this subject was done. I wouldn’t push it, even tried to tell myself maybe I was overreacting.

“You’re right,” I finally said and heard her exhale. “Tell me about school. Any cute boys?” She giggled and was glad she couldn’t be easily swayed by the conversation.

For the next five minutes we talked about her school and how the boys were cute but not smart enough for her.

I talked about mundane things that I thought would keep her mind off the uncomfortable topic of our father and Francesca.

I was laughing at something she said when I heard the elevator stop at the floor, then the sound of heavy footsteps in the anteroom. A second later the front door opened and Nikolai stepped inside.

I gasped at the sight in front of me.

“Amara? What’s wrong?” There was concern instantly laced in Claudia’s voice.

I smoothed my hand down my sweater, tried to compose myself, and in a steady, even tone I said, “nothing. Just dropped my coffee and it spilled everywhere.” The lie came easily because the truth was something I wouldn’t ever reveal to my sister. “Listen, let me call you back so I can clean this up.”

I disconnected the call and let the cell drop to the couch cushion.

And then I stared at Nikolai. He hadn’t moved from his spot by the front door, and it wasn’t the dark look in his eyes that horrified me. It was the fact blood was splattered on the collar of his white button down shit and at the base of his throat.

I found myself taking a step toward him, and another, and another until I was only a foot from where he stood. I only took a moment to stare into his blue eyes before I lowered my gaze down his face and neck and stopped at where the splatter of blood was.

“What happened?” My voice was raised and loud in the sudden deafening silence.

“I had unfinished business to take care of.” His response was to the point, cut and dry. Hard and sharp.

He unbuttoned his jacket, shrugged it off his broad shoulders, and tossed it over the back of the kitchen counter chair. And then he turned and walked over to the bar, pouring himself a drink.

I kept the comment to myself that it was barely noon, because the more I let his words sink in, the more I let the sight of that blood on his neck and collar filter through my consciousness, it was that I realized the truth.

His “unfinished business” was him taking out the man from the club. I didn’t know how I came to the realization so quickly, or how it also solidified in me.

But as if he read my thoughts he looked over his shoulder, lifted his whiskey glass to his mouth, and took a long drink as if silently agreeing that I was correct.

“You can’t go around killing people.” I had no idea why I said those words. They were the worst possible thing to say at this moment.

He didn’t respond right away, just finished off his glass and poured himself another before turning and facing me. Then he took a step closer, and another one until we were only a few feet apart.

“Sweetheart, don’t you know who you married?” He brought his glass to his mouth and took a long swallow, watching me over the rim. When he pulled the glass away he said, “I’m Nikolai fucking Petrov. I can *and* will do whatever the hell I want, and that includes taking lives of anyone who fucks with you.”

I shivered at his tone and bit my tongue to keep myself from saying something that would make the situation worse

“When someone threatens you—“ he stepped forward.

I had to crane my neck back to look into his face. He finished off that second glass of alcohol and said, “—that’s unfinished business I need to handle.”

I felt like an eternity had passed before he finished that sentence, and all I could hear was how erratic my heart was beating.

“But…” I slowly licked my lips and glanced away. “You can’t just go around killing people who threaten me.” He smirked and that act shouldn't have made my body come alive with awareness.

“Oh, sweetheart. That’s exactly what I do.”

I shook my head before he finished speaking. “You killed Yuri?” I remembered the name of the man who’d been tasked with watching over me at the fight club.

Nikolai said nothing, just continued to watch me with a steady, predator-like gaze.

“But he didn’t threaten me.”

Nikolai took another step toward me. “He didn’t realize you wandered off. You got hurt because of that. He’s also to blame for putting your life in danger. So I had to take care of it. He couldn’t be trusted any longer.”

I slowly shook my head, backing away. But he advanced, a little growl leaving him. “Don’t look at me that way.”

I wet my lips and said, “what way?” Of course I knew what he was talking about. I could feel the fear coating me like a full vat of honey. It was thick and sticky, almost suffocating.

“Like you’re terrified of me.” I did stop then. Because although I wasn’t terrified of him, I was once again frightened of the power he wielded.

I looked at the blood on his collar once more, pictured in the heinous way he killed that man, a man who didn’t deserve to die because he literally did nothing wrong.

And I knew telling–asking–Nikolai to stop hurting people was a lost cause. That was like trying to stop the starving dog from eating a steak.

“I’m not so much scared of you,” I whispered when he stopped right in front of me. “But scared of the fact you act before you think.” I would’ve never thought of saying this to my father.

But I didn’t brace myself for a hit, didn’t expect pain from my disobedience and putting my foot in my mouth, speaking my mind and my opinion. Instead Nikolai lifted his hand and cupped my cheek, staying silent for so long I didn’t know if he’d ever respond.

“I am who I am.” His words were finally spoken after long moments, his voice low, almost distant in tone. “I’m not a good man.” He’d been previously looking at my lips and slowly trailed his gaze up to my eyes, his hand still on my cheek, his thumb sweeping gently under my eye. “But you’re the only good thing I’ve ever had in my life.”

I sucked in a short breath and then held it in.

“Don’t you know I’d never hurt you? Don’t you know I’d never let anyone ever harm you again.” His eyes flashed fire and ice, his voice a balm that soothed my battered soul.

I knew he was referring to my father and I got emotional over it.

“Hey now,” he crooned and brushed an errant tear from my cheek. “You save those tears for when I’m fucking you and you’re begging for more.”

My heart was pounding so hard it was painful, threatening to burst through my ribs. How could I hate this man? How could I loathe what he did when he said things like that, when he protected me above all else.

“Nikolai…”

“Tell me you’re mine. Only mine.” His gaze was back on my lips and I wet them, my throat feeling tight, dry. My pussy was soaking wet, and I clenched my thighs together, a little needy sound leaving me.

“I’m yours.” The words were breathless, and as I watched his nostrils flare, his eyes spark fire once more, I knew what was going to happen. I knew he was going to take me fast and hard, brutal and unforgivable.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-FIVE

Amara

"Easy, baby."

Nikolai's voice soothed me and I glanced over at him as the car that had picked us up from the airstrip stopped in front of my childhood home. Even after only being gone for less than a week, staring at the massive two-story structure made me feel nothing but empty hollowness.

It didn't feel like home. Not anymore. Not when I felt alive for the first time being with Nikolai. He gave me that genuine feeling, that sensation that I actually belonged somewhere.

The sun started to set and I was thankful that we wouldn't be here that long. Dinner, Nikolai and my father speaking, and then hopefully we'd be able to plan for Claudia to come stay with us.

Thinking she'd be able to come back with us tonight was wishful thinking, and something I wasn't holding onto hope for.

I wasn't surprised that the front door wasn't opening for us automatically, even though I knew everyone was aware we'd arrived. The way we left last time had no doubt put a toxic wall between us. I'm sure my father hated me even more than he already had.

And the fact he didn't welcome us, didn't have staff there to greet us, showed me as much. In his eyes I was not welcome here as family.

Maybe Nikolai felt my physical reaction, because my muscles certainly felt like they constricted at the thought. He smoothed his hand up and down the length of my spine, murmuring something in Russian, something I

couldn’t understand because it was so soft. But it sounded sweet, encouraging even.

Nikolai brought his knuckles down on the front door. Three hard, almost aggressive raps that almost had my lips twitching. He was in full alpha mode it seemed. He wanted to fight my battles, and I wasn’t ashamed enough to not welcome it. I might be strong in several aspects of my life, but when it concerned Marco Bianchi, I’d take all the help I could get.

And who was going to turn down help from Nikolai Petrov, head of the Bratva?

After thinking that, I turned and looked up at him, his dark hair catching the sun and appearing to have an almost blue tint to it. His profile was so masculine I felt my ovaries explode. Square jaw, full lips, severe blue eyes, and dark scruff covering his cheeks.

Just as he turned and looked down at me, our eyes catching and holding, the front door opened. I forced myself to look away from my husband and saw the wait staff standing on the other side, head bowed low, refusing to meet our gaze.

I didn’t recognize her, but then again over the years we’d had a revolving door of servants thanks to my father getting displeased with any and all small annoyances he had with them.

“Mr. and Mrs. Petrov,” the servant said in a soft voice, sweeping her arm out to allow us entrance.

Nikolai ushered me to go first, his hand on the center of my back, as he followed me inside. The door shut behind us and the servant gestured for us to go to the sitting room.

Once at the entrance, I saw my mother standing over by the bar mixing a drink, and Claudia sitting on the leather couch with her head lowered and her hands in her lap. She was wearing an elegant gown, something you wouldn’t normally see for a family dinner.

My mother heard us enter and looked over her shoulder, her smile instant, but when she took in my appearance that pleasantness faded.

I wasn’t dolled up like they were, in fact I wore a pair of soft leggings and a cashmere tunic. But my mother’s mask of social pleasantry fell back into place and she set her glass down before turning fully around and walking toward me.

She embraced me but even I felt like it was stiff, and that pain of hurt and realization settled in my chest.

Once again my father was twisting my mother up, turning her against her own children. I vowed silently I would never be like this, never allow a man to control how I acted and thought, how I felt, no matter how much I feared him.

Those days were done.

“It’s so good to see you, Amara.”

I closed my eyes and exhaled, wanting the mother I’d known as a child to come back, the one who nicknamed me Sparrow not that long ago. The woman looking at me wasn't a mother admiring her daughter.

It was of a woman who was looking at someone she might pass on the street.

And God, that hurt more than anything else.

She pulled back, her hands curled around my shoulders as she smiled at me. “Married life suits you. You’re glowing.”

I found a flush stealing over my face as I thought about exactly where this “glow” came from, and it wasn’t because of nuptials. And as if Nikolai knew where my thoughts were, the hand that was still resting in the center of my back flexed.

It was as if we were both thinking about what we’d done in the private jet just a couple hours before, how he’d pulled down my leggings, hooked my legs over either side of the armrest of the leather seat, and ate me out until I came twice.

I cleared my throat and willed myself to stop blushing. I gave my mother what I hoped was a polite smile. “Thank you.” I wasn’t sure what else to say. But thankfully she turned her attention on Nikolai, cutting off the weird energy that moved between us.

“Mr. Petrov, a pleasure.”

He gave her a tight-lipped smile and said, “Oh no, Fernanda. Call me Nikolai. We are, after all, family now.”

The look my mother gave him was one of surprise, but there was something else, something that subtly screamed right in your face that she’d never see him as family. That, right there, the clouded hatred in her blue eyes, was reminiscent of my father looking through her.

Oh mamma.

She cleared her throat and inclined her head. “Claudia,” our mother said and I looked at my sister.

Playing it off like I didn't want to rush over there and embrace her was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. But I couldn't keep that mask in place when I saw the nasty bruise on her cheek.

"Claudia," I whispered and was standing in front of her before I even realized I'd moved. "What happened?" I let my fingers hover over her face, afraid to touch her cheek and harm her further.

"It's nothing. An accident." My mother was the one to speak and I gritted my teeth as I kept my focus on my sister.

An accident. I felt my blood boil. "Father did this." My voice was so low only Claudia would hear. And it wasn't a question.

"It's fine," Claudia said in a hard whisper and I knew she didn't want to talk about it. But she didn't have to.

Our bastard of a father had hurt her.

I reached out to take her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze, a slight smile covering my lips that I hoped conveyed I'd make sure everything would be okay.

When I exhaled and looked over my shoulder at Nikolai, I could see his focus on me, his jaw set hard. His gaze slid to Claudia, and I saw a muscle under his jaw tick as he no doubt saw the bruise she sported.

"I know Marco mentioned having a word with you before we sit down for dinner," my mother addressed Nikolai.

He casually placed his hands inside his coat pocket and stared down at her with a blasé expression. "And where is he? He couldn't greet us at the door? He sent you to be his errand boy?"

Although I didn't approve of Nikolai speaking to my mother with such a hard tone, at that moment I didn't care because my sister had been hurt and clearly my mother didn't see any issue with it, not with her calling it an "accident". So I couldn't find the energy to care if she was offended. Which she clearly was by the startled gasp she made.

"Excuse me, Mr. Petrov?"

Nikolai gave her a tight smile. "You heard me. How about you tell Marco we're waiting in here for him. If he needs to speak with me he can walk his ass to his own sitting room and address me himself instead of sending his wife to do it."

My mother's face turned red and she bristled, but she knew better than to say anything else. She smoothed her hands down her dress and nodded

once before side-eyeing me and Claudia, and then leaving the room. When she was gone I exhaled and Claudia gave a little laughter.

“Holy shit,” my sister cursed and I held in my laughter at hearing her say it. “That was probably the greatest thing I’ve ever seen.”

We didn’t say anything else and only a few moments passed before I heard the heavy footsteps of my father approaching, the sound of my mother’s heels clicking softly following. I pulled Claudia off the couch, my hand still in hers, and together we moved over to Nikolai. Once again I wasn’t ashamed to have Nikolai in my corner. I’d take any ally I could get.

The sitting room doors burst open and I felt my father’s fit of anger before I even saw him. His cheeks were colored beet red, his dark eyes narrowed on my husband. My mother stepped in behind him, turned to close the door, and then moved off to the side where she could clasp her hands behind her back and stay silent like a good little Italian wife my father had shaped.

For so long I hated this life for her, loathed how she’d been beaten and brainwashed, molded into the woman she was today. I’d love her regardless. I was still a little girl who wanted her mother to brush her hair and tell her everything was okay, but I saw things for how they were and how they’d never change.

I could have overlooked, could have ignored when she looked the other way when our father took his anger out on me or Gio. But what I would not stand for, what I would not ever be complacent in, was how she could let him do the same thing to Claudia after seeing how much it had hurt us.

She should’ve been my younger sister's champion. She should’ve protected her. She just should’ve been our mother.

I felt like I was watching a volcano about to erupt as I stared at my father. He all but had steam coming out of his ears.

“You come to my home, insult my wife, and demand things of me?”

I had a feeling this had nothing to do with how Nikolai had spoken to my mother, or how he wanted my father to join us in the sitting room. Maybe there were things going on in the background between the Bratva in the Cosa Nostra, things I’d never be privy to.

Things I didn’t want to know about.

There was definitely something going on between them. That was the only explanation for how my father was reacting right now. Or maybe it had

nothing to do with any of that. Maybe there was something else. Surely it couldn't be because of the Edoardo situation.

"You forget who you're talking to, Bianchi." Nikolai didn't move, didn't raise his voice. He was a pillar of calm and collected as he stared down my father.

And when Marco took a step forward I didn't even sense the slightest tenseness in Nikolai.

My father started speaking in Italian, low words of insults and slurs. I felt my eyes widen as he called Nikolai horrible things, as he talked about how the Russian and the Bratva were nothing but dogs.

"Father," I finally snapped and took a step forward. "You will not speak to my husband that way." Nikolai's arm snapped out instantly, a bar in front of me that kept me from going any closer.

I curled my hands into tight fists at my sides and hoped all my anger and disgust for the man who was nothing but a sperm donor, didn't show through.

"You cannot talk to my husband like that." The words were pulled from me again. I felt something monumental change in me, one that had me growing stronger. Being that queen Nikolai said I was.

And I would not let this man, who hurt me while I grew up, who was now hurting my sister, do the same to the man I was falling for.

Have fallen for.

My father laughed darkly, his chuckles making my hackles rise. "Is this what the Russians allow?" He addressed Nikolai but he was staring at me. "You let your women fight your battles?"

Now it was Nikolai's turn to laugh. "A man is only as strong as the woman at his side. For there wasn't just Satan, but Lilith, as well."

My father narrowed his eyes before looking at Nikolai.

"And if you have a weak woman beside you, well…" Nikolai shrugged, the unspoken insult speaking loudly.

My mother was weak, subjective to my father's whims and demands.

My father opened his mouth just as the doorbell rang and for a second no one moved. I didn't think anyone even breathed. I could hear the soft sound of shoes in the foyer, the door opening, followed by soft, unintelligible voices slowly filtering into the sitting room.

Yet still no one spoke, my father still glaring daggers at Nikolai, my husband's arm still held in front of me, and my hand still wrapped tightly

around Claudia's.

"Why don't you just tell me why you're really here, *Russian*."

Although my father had arranged this marriage, it was very clear he didn't agree with it. Marco Bianchi may be high ranking in the Cosa Nostra, but he didn't call the final shots, and I was sure me being pawned off to Nikolai had come from someone much higher.

So it didn't matter if my father saw this as a bad union. He'd never go against orders.

"Why am I here?" Once again Nikolai's voice was even. "I thought we were here to have dinner with *family*?" The way Nikolai spit out that last word told me he didn't consider Marco such.

And the truth was, neither did I. After moving out of my childhood home I realize that this has never been my family.

My mother started speaking to my father quickly in Italian, but my father refused to look away from Nikolai, and when he lifted a hand in her direction, she became silent instantly.

And then all of our attention was turned to the entryway as two people stopped right inside. One of the servants stood beside Francesca, the latter looking at everyone with wide eyes, her oversized jacket dwarfing her, and her hair looking windblown.

The silence stretched out heavy and thick, and as I stared at Francesca, I felt my brows lowered. There was something off about her, something about her demeanor that screamed panicked. Although she appeared fine, relatively speaking, her eyes had a glossy tint to them and were red rimmed.

She looked around the room with a startled expression on her face, her hands moving up and down her jacket.

"Oh. I didn't realize there were… family plans going on."

"It's okay," Claudia said and let go of my hand to walk around myself and Nikolai to stand beside Francesca.

I was still so confused over the friendship between my sister and Francesca that none of this made sense.

"Now is not the time, Francesca." My father spat out the words and cast a withering stare in her direction, which had her cowering and taking a step back.

"I just wanted to talk," she whispered, as she stared at Marco.

My father huffed out and stormed toward her, taking her by the arm and pulling her out and into the foyer. Everyone left in the room stared at each

other with clear confusion on their faces.

I walked toward the entryway and peered out to see my father and Francesca standing in the foyer, my father a foot from the small girl, his hand swinging between them and his hushed voice slightly raised in clear anger.

“I don’t understand what’s going on,” I whispered more to myself, but before I could turn back around to stand beside Nikolai and wait to get this over with, father was striding away from Francesca, who was now crying heavily by the front door and staring at him as if he’d just torn her heart out.

I felt Nikolai’s hand curl around my wrist and then he was pulling me back to his side.

“Claudia,” my father barked out once he was back in the sitting room. “Deal with her and get her out of the house. She’s causing a scene.”

Claudia looked at me with wide eyes and confusion on her face before she left the room and went to tend to Francesca.

“What was that about?” I asked but my father didn’t answer. He paced back and forth as he ran a hand over his hair. He murmured low, his words muffled so I couldn’t understand him clearly.

I looked at Nikolai, who gripped my waist with his firm hand, squeezing me gently in reassurance. I slipped out of the room and walked into the foyer, where Francesca was still standing. She was sobbing at this point, and the closer I got to her, the more I realized she wasn’t just upset. She was drunk. The scent of alcohol poured from her.

My heart hurt for her. I could only assume how much pain she was in over Edoardo. It wasn’t like she could actually confess her feelings about him. She’d have to take that secret to the grave with her or risk tarnishing her and her family’s reputation.

“Francesca?” I said in a gentle voice and stopped a few inches from her, not moving or speaking again until she sniffed, wiped her cheeks, and then looked up at me.

She wiped her eyes quickly and cleared her throat. “I’m sorry. I’m a mess. I just… I felt so out of control. I walked out of my house and didn’t realize I was here until I was knocking on the door.” She wiped away a few more errant tears again I looked over my shoulder and into the sitting room to where everyone still was.

“I’m sorry if my father said something that upset you further. He’s… well, he’s like all the men in our lives.” I knew she would understand what I

meant, but what I didn't expect from her was the expression on her face. Narrowed eyes and pure hatred.

For long moments she didn't speak to me, just stared as if I were the worst thing she'd ever seen. It was as if a switch had been turned inside of her. Gone was the girl who appeared to have a broken heart and in her place was one who appeared to not even have one.

"Look at you," she sneered. "Got everything you wanted. A marriage where your husband clearly treats you well." She pursed her lips. "The way I've seen him look at you…" she shook her head. "A man who would level anything who tried to hurt you. He'd never toss you away."

I had no idea what the hell was going on. "Is everything okay?" Something inside of me said I needed to back away, to go back to Nikolai, the room full of people. But I had a feeling I knew what this was about. She probably blamed me for Edoardo's death.

If I hadn't stepped into that hallway, hadn't seen what I'd seen, Edoardo wouldn't have a bullet in his head thanks to my husband.

And a part of me couldn't blame Francesca, couldn't hold any ill will toward her in that regard. If the roles reversed and something happened to Nikolai, I would've definitely blamed Francesca as well.

I found myself lifting my hand and placing it over my heart, my chest suddenly aching , a premonition that something horrible was going to happen.

Nikolai.

I looked over my shoulder and could see him and my father speaking. I was thankful no one was paying attention to me out here.

"This is all your fault. It has been from the very beginning."

I faced forward again, my face no doubt showing my utter shock and confusion. "I'm sorry about what happened to Edoardo. It was a 'wrong place at the wrong time' kind of thing. I know how hard this must be for you, especially since you can't tell anyone about your relationship or how you felt about him."

Francesca slowly shook her head. "Edoardo?" she chuckled humorlessly again. "You think this is about *him*?"

"I–"

"No, this is about how *you* ruined everything." Her voice was high-pitched. It was reminiscent of what I assumed someone sounded like who was losing their mind. "Do you think these tears are for Edoardo? Stupid

bitch. No, I'm not crying because he died. I'm crying because Marco found out what I was doing behind his back with that low-life foot soldier."

For a minute I was stunned speechless. I had no idea what she was talking about. What did my father have to do with this? I looked over my shoulder again but Nikolai and Marco were still speaking. The longer I looked at my father, the more my thoughts started turning.

I don't understand," I said softly and faced her once more. "I don't know what you're talking about. You were afraid my father would find out about you and Edoardo? Why would he care?" I held my hands out, palms up, shaking my head.

"Are you really that dense? You really can't let the truth sink in." She took a small step toward me. "*Really* think about it, Amara. Really think about what I'm telling you right now." She gave a humorless laugh and shook her head. "I have nothing now. Nothing to lose. I don't care who knows the truth."

I looked into Francesca's crazed eyes, replayed her words over and over again, but I didn't want to accept the truth that I'd come to. I didn't want that to be my reality because it made no sense.

"You and my father?" The tone in which I said it must have spoken volumes, because she gave me a hard, tightlipped smile.

"Since I was sixteen. You wouldn't believe how hard it was at first. He's not a gentle man, as I'm sure you would know being his daughter. But over the last two years I grew to love him." The smile she sported now was as if she were recalling a time that made her happy, and her gaze was latched onto something over my shoulder. No, not something, but someone.

"You've been sleeping with my father since you were sixteen?" The voice didn't sound like my own. "I—"

"Don't believe me? I don't really care. He doesn't want anything to do with me now. He found out about Edoardo, blames me as well for the death and how the situation has gone from bad to worse between him and the Russians." Her expression hardened. I saw pure hatred on her face directed right at me. "He wants nothing to do with me. He just threw me away as if what we shared the past two years meant nothing." She started crying again, but it wasn't one of sadness. It was one of pure rage. It was one that a human had who had nothing else to lose. "I thought he loved me," she whispered.

“But if you loved my father, why were you with Edoardo?” I should’ve kept my mouth shut. I knew that was the worst thing I could’ve said because her gaze was crazy and cold.

“Edoardo found out about me and Marco, threatening to ruin my reputation, the reputation of my family. I couldn’t let that happen. I couldn’t let Marco know. I knew I’d lose him if he found out. He’d kill Edoardo If I told him. And Edoardo told me he had contingencies in place if anything happened to him, things that would ruin everything. Everything.” Her voice was rising even more now. “Edoardo wanted to rise in my father’s rank, wanted me to get him in good with my father. He used me like every person in my life has.”

I covered my mouth with a hand, feeling my eyes widen.

“He made me do things with him. Do things *to* him. I didn’t have a choice. I refused to have him ruin everything. My life, Marco’s, my family.”

Everything in me said I needed to leave, that being around her when she was like this wasn’t safe.

“You came here tonight to try and convince my father to stay with you?”

She didn’t bother wiping the tears from her eyes now. “I’ve been hanging out with Claudia and hoping to talk to him, to make him see I love him and only him. But he avoids me at all costs. But I kept trying. And nothing was working. And now it’s over. It’s over.” She shook her head. “If he thought Edoardo’s death was a mess that I helped cause, I’m going to make sure to make a bigger one. Because I have nothing else to lose now.”

I took a step back. Her words were too final.

Everything happened so slowly as I watched her reach inside her coat pocket. My heart was racing when I saw the light catch the metal of the gun she pulled out. She held the weapon between us, her hand shaking.

It was my turn to shake my head. “No. You can put that away. You don’t have to do that.” I didn’t dare look over my shoulder to see if Nikolai or anyone else saw or heard what had happened.

“He doesn’t want me. He doesn't want to even see if the baby is his.” She wiped at her cheeks. “He said even if it was, it’s nothing but a bastard.” She squeezed her eyes shut.

Oh God. The situation had gone from horrible to disastrous. Francesca was pregnant? And the baby was possibly my father’s? My stomach churned and nausea filled me. She opened her eyes and looked over my

shoulder and I knew Nikolai and my father were aware of what was happening.

“Put that away before you hurt yourself, you foolish girl.” My father’s voice was rough and hard, scolding as if she were nothing but a child instead of a young woman he’d been having an affair with for the past two years. The girl he’d been sleeping with since she was only sixteen.

God, I was going to be sick.

“You said you’d take care of me. You said I was the only one.”

I felt like I was drifting away, my mind hazy, thoughts not making any sense. I wanted to look at Nikolai, to garner some strength, a little stability. I knew he’d give that to me, but I was rooted in place.

“Francesca,” my father snapped out. “Put the fucking gun away.”

She was shaking her head vigorously, the tears falling so fast and heavy that I knew she wouldn't be able to see clearly.

“How about we all just take a breath.” It was Nikolai who spoke, his voice even. My heart started beating faster as I stared at the gun Francesca held, the gun pointed right at me.

“You kept me on the side. You told me you’d leave her. You told me we’d be together.” She put a hand on her belly and I heard my mother gasp but it sounded distant, as if I were underwater.

“Maybe I should take away something you care about.” Francesca’s vice rose and rose and rose. “Tell them,” she screamed at Marco. “Tell them you want me to get rid of the baby, even if it is yours.”

The foyer was deathly silent, no one even breathing after that bombshell was dropped.

“You’re acting like a dramatic child.” My father’s voice became icy and cold, collected and calm. “And you’re making a scene.”

“Fuck making a scene,” Francesca screamed. I’m going to take from you what you hold important. I’m going to force your hand in life like you’re doing with mine. Fuck you, Marco.” I watched as Francesca shifted her body, her arms swinging out so the gun was pointed off to the side.

The next sequence of events happened in slow motion as I looked over my shoulder and saw that the gun was trained on Claudia.

I was moving before I realized I was in motion. Although time seemed to slow, I knew it was going fast. Precious seconds that made everything happen in the blink of an eye.

I heard a shot ring out a second after I took Francesca to the ground. I heard a man roar out. Nikolai.

Adrenaline pumped through me as we both struggled. All I could think about, focus on, was getting the gun away from Francesca. Another shot rang out, and shouts came from behind me.

“Please. Please.” I was whispering, screaming, begging and pleading. One more shot and both of us froze, her eyes wide as she stared at me, the expression in her face probably a mirror image of mine.

I was floating, my body lifting off hers, strong arms wrapped around my body and cradling me close.

“Claudia,” I shouted. I could hear the words in my head, felt my lips move, but as everything came rushing back to me, I realized I wasn’t actually making any noise at all.

Sound faded away and all I heard was the *whoosh-whoosh* that filled my ears. *Whoosh-whoosh*. *Whoosh-whoosh.*

When did it become so cold? Why couldn’t I hear? Why couldn’t I speak?

I found myself on the ground and staring at the ceiling. I blinked, my focus going in and out. But then Nikolai’s face became clear. I saw the pure, stark terror on his face as he stared at something straight ahead, as his mouth moved but I heard no sound. He had this crazed look in his eyes, his face becoming red as he shouted something, as he lifted a hand and swung it wildly in front of him.

And then nothing else mattered as everything faded and I let the frigid hands that had a firm grip on me drag me down into the abyss.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-SIX

Amara

It was warm but it didn’t feel real, like when you’re staring into a television screen at a roaring fire and can imagine the heat moving to you, through you, yet it’s not your reality.

But as consciousness slowly altered through me, stronger and faster with each passing moment, I was aware of sounds and smells filtering through my nose, ears, and brain.

A crackling fire, the scent of real wood burning.

Something strong, stringent close to me. Antiseptic.

I felt a heavy weight on me, but it wasn’t suffocating, it didn't hold me down even though I couldn’t move.

“You won’t leave me.”

At first I didn’t know if I’d heard the words correctly, recognized the voice. But then I felt warmth—real heat—cover the side of my face.

A palm. Big and strong. Familiar.

“I forbid it.”

Nikolai.

I turned my head toward that hand, that warmth.

“That’s it, my good girl,” he crooned gently. “You’ll stay with me because there is no other option.” Nikolai started murmuring in Russian. Prayers maybe.

I wanted to tell him praying couldn’t stop death, and I felt like that’s where I was headed as the events leading up to right now came rushing back violently, painfully.

“Come on, my sweet, beautiful girl.” His words were whispered soft, his tone gentle. I’d never heard him sound like this before. “Open and let me see that gorgeous ocean color.”

And as if his words were what I needed to find that inner strength, to push past the pain and drugged sensation that tried to keep me under its spell, I opened my eyes.

I kept thinking about what had happened with Francesca. The gun, the shots I’d heard. I didn’t remember after that, after she’d looked at me with these wide eyes and this shocked expression on her face.

I blinked several times and stared at the ceiling. I looked around the room, seeing familiar things, items and fixtures from one of our guest rooms.

“I’m still here.” My voice was thick, my throat tight as I formed the words and pushed them out with a thick tongue.

There was a man who started speaking in Russian. Nikolai barked out something that sounded vile and dangerous. A threat.

He turned his head so he was screaming at something across the room, presumably the man who’d spoken. But I was still too heavy to follow his gaze. A muscle under his cheek ticked, his neck flexing as his face turned red as he continued to spit out angry words to the man.

But still he kept his hand on my cheek, his thumb gently sweeping right under my eyes.

“Do it all. Whatever it takes,” he responded in English. “Your life depends on hers.” The words were sharp and cold and hard. I was glad they weren’t directed at me. And then he was looking at me again.

I realized my mouth was moving, but the words I tried to speak were too low. I felt too weak and I God, everything hurt. I closed my eyes and the words coming through were louder.

He leaned in and whispered, “what is it, *malishka*?” His voice was soft, softer than I’d ever heard it.

“It’s cold.” I didn’t know if I said that out loud, but when my teeth started chattering I felt Nikolai’s other hand cover each side of my face.

“Little doll.” His voice sounded funny. His face started to bleed out of focus. I didn’t want to stop looking at him.

“You’ll be fine. You’ll be fine.” He kept saying that over and over again. He stroked my cheeks and brought one of his hands up to show me that my tears covered his fingers. “Your tears are so sweet, but not like this, not

right now. You'll give me more of these sweet tears when you're better. Only then, when we are laying together in our bed and I can use my body as a shield protecting you, only then will you give me these tears because they'll be in pleasure." He leaned down and kissed me on the lips. "You'll give me all that because I won't accept any less."

Then there was someone standing beside me, the blankets being pushed aside, and the sensation of tugging moving my body. But I never stopped looking at Nikolai.

"Because these tears are as sweet as the hold you have over me."

And it was those words that pulled me down. I fought and fought and fought, not wanting to get dragged to the undercurrents and taken away from Nikolai.

But like almost all aspects of my life thus far, I had no choice but to comply.

I HEARD the gentle sloshing of water, then felt the warm droplets along my brow. I furrowed my brow and heard someone shushing me.

When I opened my eyes it was to see the wavy, out of focus visage of Claudia sitting at my bedside.

"Hey you," Claudia said softly and ran the rag over my temple and down my cheek. "Scared the hell out of all of us." More sounds of water sloshing, of dripping, and then the soft sweep of the rag on the other side of my head. "Gio arrived late last night. He's freaking out, of course, going all beast-mode on everyone, threatening to kill anyone who gets too close to you—"

"—you're okay," I cut her off and lifted my arm—which felt far too heavy—to place my hand on her thigh. "I thought, God, Claudia, I thought you were going to get shot."

She gave me a sad smile and shook her head, a stray tear sliding down her cheek. "I'm fine. I'm fine. And it's because you acted, even if it was dumb and crazy and I hate you for getting hurt because of it." She smiled sadly and for the first time my sister didn't seem like she was a girl. She held herself like a woman who'd already seen far too much. "But…" She looked away.

“But what?” I tried to sit up but gasped in pain, my side burning, searing, like I was consumed by fire.

“Hey, hey, hey,” she said and shook her head vehemently. “Stay put. You’re going to ruin the work the doctor did and then that’ll piss off Nikolai and he’ll either kill someone or kick Gio’s ass again.”

I stilled and Claudia chuckled. “When Gio first arrived he strode in here like his ass was on fire. You woke up but you were out of it. You started thrashing on the bed. Nikolai dragged him out by his throat, kicked his ass in the hallway, and told him the next time he hurt you—even inadvertently—he'd put a bullet in each of his knees caps.” Claudia rolled her eyes and exhaled. “Men.” She said that lone word like it explained everything and I smiled.

I had no recollection of Gio coming in here or thrashing around. But that wasn’t important. Because the longer I stared at her face the more I knew something was wrong. Really wrong. “Tell me,” I croaked out.

She exhaled on a huff and tossed the rag in the small bowl on the bedside table. “Francesca shot off three rounds. One of them hit you in the side, but thankfully Nikolai acted fast and got a Russian doctor here. He was covered in your blood.” Her face blanched. “Pressure on the wound, and was the only one not freaking out. As long as there isn’t an infection and you don’t strain yourself, he said you’ll make a full recovery.”

I closed my eyes and wet my dry lips. “But?” I knew there was more.

“The first bullet hit father, and the last got Francesca and she’s dead, too.” I slowly opened my eyes and stared at my sister. “Father is dead.”

I waited for the shock of that to hit me, the sorrow, that sadness of losing a parent. There was… nothing.

She looked down at her hands, her fingers twisted together in her lap. “Is it bad that I don’t feel anything?” Her voice was low, strained.

“Oh, Claudia.” I tightened my fingers around her thigh until she glanced up at me. “I don’t feel anything either.” I rested my head fully back on the pillow, staring at the ceiling. “In fact,” I said harshly. “I’m glad he’s gone.”

I should’ve felt callous for saying that, but I felt so numb at the moment that I didn’t want to bring up any of that. I didn’t want to talk about my father or what he’d done with Francesca.

I know if I hadn’t stopped her she would have shot Claudia, maybe even my mother, God maybe Nikolai if she’d been quick enough. I was glad

things happened the way they had because if not everything would've been so much worse.

I closed my eyes and breathed through my nose slowly. "He was a bastard. Cruel and heartless and deserved what he got." I squeezed my eyes tighter and felt acid rise up my throat. "Francesca was lost, lost in the grief and her love for a piece of shit who could never give her the love she deserved." I rubbed my hands over my eyes, my chest tight. "How is mother?"

When I heard Claudia sigh I opened my eyes and looked at my sister. "She's fine. Shaken up, but I'm pretty sure it's not because she saw father bleed out in the foyer." She gave a humorous laugh and shook her head. "I'm sure she's trying to process everything that Francesca told her, although you and I both know he was no saint, and obviously didn't take his marriage vows seriously."

She ran a hand over her face and for the first time I noticed the dark circles under her eyes.

"I can't believe he was having an affair with Francesca of all people, and when they started she was so young." Claudia made a disgusted face. "And the baby, Amara.." She looked at me with sad eyes. "She was pregnant. Possibly with father's baby–"

"--hey, let's not think about any of that. Because at the end of the day it doesn't matter. What's done is done."

"He could have survived," Claudia whispered, her eyes wide.

"What do you mean?"

She moistened her lips and looked at the closed bedroom door. "Father." She glanced back at me. "He might have survived, but Nikolai wouldn't let the doctor he brought in help. Nikolai demanded he only focus on you, and told everyone to stay where they were. No one, not the staff, not us, were to call anyone for help. He said he'd take care of everything."

My heart was beating a mile a minute at the revelation.

"And as the doctor was working on you, Nikolai had the coldest look on his face as he stared at father, who was bleeding out all over the tile. Mother was crying and kneeling beside him, but she wouldn't touch him, just kept shaking her head and staring at where Francesca lay dead."

My breath hiccuped in my chest. Oh God. Nikolai had let our father die, and had watched him. And I knew why he'd done it, why he hadn't saved Marco. Because if my father died at the hands of Francesca, this way it

wouldn’t cause a war between the Cosa Nostra and the Bratva. It would look like Francesca, a scorned lover, had shot my father and killed him in a fit of rage.

If Nikolai had killed a Capo in the Cosa Nostra, family or not, alliances or not, our families would have been at war. The organizations would be at war.

And as I thought about all of that, as I thought about the circumstances that led up to it all, and pieced together the calculation Nikolai had done to make sure my father died the way he had, my chest felt like it was closing in.

“Oh hey, I didn’t tell you to upset you, Amara. Calm down. Calm down. It’s okay.” She softly murmured and pulled the blanket up to my chest.

What I knew, and what I wouldn’t tell her, was that what I felt right now had nothing to do with being upset our father died and Nikolai could have prevented it. No, I felt like this, felt like I couldn’t breathe, because Nikolai had done what he’d done to ensure Claudia was safe.

He did this for me.

“You need to rest. I can tell you’ve probably been up since all this happened.” Her shoulders sagged and she nodded once more. “How long have I been out anyway?”

“Three days.”

God, I’d lost seventy-two hours and I had no recollection of anything but pain and drifting away.

“But now that you’re up and talking, and look relatively well, I feel like I could probably sleep for a month.” She gave me a small smile. “Besides, Nikolai asked,” she rolled her eyes and murmured, “demanded more like it, that I let him know the moment you were up. He’s been pacing this bedroom the entire time. The only reason he’s not here right now is because his brother flew in from New York and he and Nikolai are speaking with Gio in the study. Now that father is gone Gio has taken up Head of the Family. I’m sure they have to get their houses in order and what this all means for the organizations.”

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-SEVEN

Amara

A month later

I heard Sasha whine at the door and got off the couch, my hand going to my side instinctively because I knew the movement and shift in position would tug at my still healing wound.

But I kept my expression neutral, not wanting Nikolai, who was just in the kitchen and on the phone, to see the discomfort on my face. All that would accomplish was him narrowing his eyes, growling low, and hovering over me as he demanded I stay on the couch with my feet propped up.

Even after a month, healing was slow going, and at this point I was frustrated because I felt like an invalid thanks to Nikolai not letting me so much as put my own shoes on.

And then there was the no sex rule he'd put in place until I was fully healed.

A month with no sex. Four weeks of not having my very ravenous husband touch me in a way that would get me off. And God did I want to get off.

I turned on the video monitor for the security camera outside the door, saw Dmitry staring at the lens with a smirk on his lips, and hit another button to unlock the door. I could still hear Nikolai speaking in the kitchen, but I also felt his gaze on me. Nothing got past him.

After taking a step back, the door swung open and Dmitry strode in. He crouched immediately in front of Sasha, started murmuring and cooing in

Russian to her, then kissed the top of her head right between her ears before rising once more.

Sasha whined and moved over to me, butting her sleek head against my thigh and looking up at me.

“She’s always in a grumpy as fuck mood when I come and get her, like she’s pissed at me for taking her away.”

Nikolai stepped out of the kitchen, pocketed his phone, and came to stand beside me. He slipped his hand up my back and curled his fingers around my nape.

Dmitry snorted. “You’re so fucking possessive.” He clicked his tongue and Sasha gave another whine but trotted over to him. He started speaking to Nikolai in Russian, and the entire time he stroked his fingers over the back of my neck. The longer he did that, the more I grew aroused, wet and achy between my thighs, annoyed because I knew he wouldn't do anything about it to ease my frustration.

Dmitry gave a nod toward me and I smiled, trying to appear like my pussy wasn’t throbbing right now. Then he was gone and I was alone with my husband, who still stood beside me stroking my nape. I breathed out, about to beg him shamelessly to fuck me, but before a word could spill from my lips he was kissing my temple and moving away.

I gritted my teeth and looked over at him with narrowed eyes. “Really?”

He braced his hands on the kitchen island, his upper body curled forward, his head slightly tipped up as he looked at me from under his lashes. And he smirked, the devlishly handsome bastard smirked at me.

“You did that on purpose,” I seethed out.

He cocked a dark brow. “Did what, little doll?”

I curled my fingers into my palms. “Got me all worked up knowing you won’t do anything about it.” He didn't move or speak or even blink as he watched me. But then he stood to his towering height and moved around the island.

“Is your tight little pussy drenched for me?” He slowly came forward and I wet my lips and found myself taking a step back. “Are you wanting me to fill you, baby girl?”

God, his words had my inner muscles clenching painfully. Yes, yes I wanted to be filled by him. “I’m healed,” I whispered. “I don’t see why you’re trying to be so careful now. Things are fine with me. Even your doctor said so.”

He smirked and kept coming closer as I kept taking steps back. “You think I don’t notice the winces on your face whenever you stand? You think I don’t see the way you clutch your side when you walk?” He cocked an eyebrow. “I see everything that concerns you.”

I ran my hands up and down my thighs, feeling my body light up even more as I grew even more desperate for him.

“Is my beautiful girl pouting because I haven’t gotten her off in far too long?”

I started panting and moved away from him. He kept his focus on me as he stalked me through the house, down the hallway, up the stairs, and when I was in the master suite and the bed stopped my retreat, he stilled.

He looked so calm and collected, and I found it so attractive, so dangerous and alluring. “Get naked for me, *krasavitsa*.”

He chuckled low as I quickly started tearing at my clothes, the anticipation and excitement of knowing he was finally going to fuck me causing a light sheen of perspiration to dot my body.

When I stood there naked I saw his gaze lower to my side. Although the wound was healed on the outside, there was a nasty bullet wound scar of puckered red flesh. Instinctively I placed a hand over it, shameful at how disgusting it looked causing my face to heat as I lowered my head.

“No,” Nikolai said sharply, with anger in his voice. He was in front of me before I heard him move, and had his knuckle under my chin and tipped my head so I could look at him. “You don’t hide from me.” The sharpness in his voice, the fierceness in his eyes, had me nodding. “You are gorgeous. Even if you were covered in scars and missing limbs, I’d still find you the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. I’d still desire you like nothing else in my life.”

And then he was touching me, stroking me between my legs, working me up to a fever-pitch. And the entire time he held his gaze with mine, his nostrils flared, his eyes blazing with passion.

“You like my fingers in you?”

I bit my lip and nodded, aching for him already. But I also knew he liked to tease me, toy with my body until I was crying and begging to be fucked.

He leaned in close and whispered gruffly against my ear, “I won’t make you wait tonight, baby girl.” With a final bite to the side of my throat,

followed by the tip of his nose pressing right under my ear so he could inhale deeply, he thrust his fingers into my pussy.

I cried out and arched my back, feel the fullness, the stretch of him being two fingers deep in me.

“Go on darling. Show me how badly you want this.”

And I did.

His mouth was by my ear and his harsh breathing, coupled with the feel of his hard erection digging into my belly, told me how turned on he was by this. “You’re doing so good fucking yourself on my fingers, being a good girl and getting off for me.”

I cried out when he thrust his fingers deeper into my pussy and curled them inward, hitting that swollen, secret spot in me that had me crying out and fucking myself even harder on the digits.

“You feel so good.” He had his other hand on the small of my back and jerked me forward even more. I rose on my toes and let my head fall back as I moaned. “You’re the best.” He ran his tongue along my cheek, licking me before biting the side of my throat. He was thrusting his fingers in and out of me, harder and faster. Painfully. “Keep being good for me.” I moaned his name. “Yeah… that’s it.” His mouth was by my ear as he grunted, “come for me, *printsessa*.”

And I did on that command, gripping his thickly corded biceps, my mouth at his neck, my teeth latched onto the muscular column as I came.

“Mmm,” he hummed. “You’re gushing for me, baby girl, getting my hand all soaked like my good little whore.” He took my mouth in a hard, possessive kiss, biting my tongue, my lips. “You’re making a mess, my dirty little girl.”

The orgasm kept going on and on, and all I could do was hold on, working my hips and pussy on his fingers, giving into the pleasure that had been denied to me for too long.

As if he read my thoughts he groaned, “never again. I’ll never deny this hot little cunt again, never deny you anything.”

I sagged against him and rested my forehead on the center of his chest, panting, my mind hazy with the post-euphoric orgasm. Just when I felt like my legs would give out, he scooped me into his arms and laid me on the bed. I watched with half-closed eyes as he got out of his clothes and climbed into bed beside me.

“Tell me you’re mine.” He pulled me close, held me, and buried his face in the crook of my neck.

“I’m yours. You know I’m always yours.”

“Yeah you fucking are. Only mine,” he murmured. I heard him inhale deeply. “God, you always smell so incredible.” His arms tightened around me.

“I love you.” I brought one of his hands that rested against my chest to my mouth and kissed his tattooed knuckles.

“*Zhizn moya*.” *My life.* “I love you, too. More than anything else in my worthless life. I love you, would kill for you, lay down my life to protect you.” He inhaled again and I closed my eyes. “Not even the devil could come up from the fiery pits of hell and pry you from me.” He kissed the side of my neck.

And that’s how I relaxed, with Nikolai’s hard cock nestled between my ass cheeks, his warm breath along the side of my throat, and his words of slaying the very devil himself to keep me in his life the last things I heard and felt as I let sleep take me under.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-EIGHT

Ruin

They called me Razoreniye. Ruined. And I suppose that's what I was.

A broken shell of what was once humanity, a man who once felt empathy.

I'd been shaped and molded into the killer I was today, started at a young age to be a weapon for the Bratva. Bloodshed give me sustenance, violence was my strength. And destruction was my power.

They'd taken my memories, stripped them from me and replaced them with orders and routines, rigorous training and aggression so I knew nothing else. Expected nothing less. And I accepted it.

I embraced it. I enjoyed playing their god, holding their fragile life in my hands and staring into their eyes as I snuffed it out.

And I was good at what I did. The best. Because When you had nothing in life, nothing to lose, nothing else mattered.

But there was one thing they could never take for me. One memory that I held onto like that last petal on a flower before the frost snapped it in half.

There was one image, one sight that would always be mine, forever buried in my black, corrupted soul. And although it had been decades since I last saw her, since I heard her voice, or smelled that soft, floral scent that clung to her hair, she was mine.

If there ever was a time of a retelling, our time was now. My beauty with the scarred, monstrous beast, too pure and good for someone like me. I didn't deserve her, should have stayed away, but our stories were always meant to be told, our lives intertwined.

And I made sure that was our destiny as I stayed to the shadows and stalked her in the dark.

She was mine, and it was time I finally took her.

The End.

Want to read Razoreniye's (Ruin's) story? Check out **CORRUPTION,** another standalone story in the *Underworld Kings* series.

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